DAD'S NUKE (part 2)
by Marc Laidlaw

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"Peter John . . . psst . . . Peter John . . . are you awake? Come on, your eyes are open."

P.J. turned away from the whisperer, knowing that if he acknowledged Michael it would only make things worse. Things were bad enough already.

"You can't be sleeping with your eyes open, Peter John. Please.
Why won't you talk to me anymore?" P.J. forced his eyes to close.

SIN

The flare of lettering, teased from his optic nerve, was as bright as an advertisement.

Mustn't think about Michael, he thought. Mustn't listen to him.
Hear no evil.

"Peter John, what's been going on with you?"

GUILT

He opened his eyes to escape the gold-lettered caption, but it persisted, hanging against the dark window, spelled out upon droplets of mist.

A second voice came whispering through the room: "He's out of it, Michael. He's gone on." P.J. bit his lip.

"He is not, I saw him open his eyes."

"Green-screen zombies sleep with their eyes open. You should be glad we're training in the field, and not in the computers."

P.J. heard nothing for a long time, and then a soft sobbing drifted from Michael's bed.

"Don't cry over him, Michael." P.J. could no longer recognize the voice; his bunkmates had become strangers to him lately. "Let's you and me . . ."

"If only he'd smile again, or say something to me, if only he would be himself."

"If only they'd hurry up and take him away, you mean. He should be with the others like him."

Bed springs creaked. P.J. heard scuffing footsteps, then the creaking of a closer bed.

"Don't waste tears on him, Michael."

"He liked me, I think."

"Get over it. I like you."

"I—I know."

"He's going somewhere you can't follow."

"Where? Why?"

"Don't worry about that now. Here."

"Oh."

SIN

No, he thought. INRI, you can't do this to me.

GUILT

I don't believe everything you show me, INRI. You make me think things I would never—

His own thoughts cut off in midstream, as happened more and more often these days, and he found himself listening to the sly mental voice that had taken to whispering more and more often in his mind: "Tell the Monitor, Peej. Go on. If you don't, INRI will find out tomorrow in forced confession. INRI finds out everything. If you haven't told the Monitor, that just makes your lesson harder tomorrow. So go ahead, turn them in. Don't just lie there and listen to it."

"No," PJ. said aloud.

The squeaking in the next bed stopped. "What was that? He said something."
"In his sleep. Be quiet, Michael."

CONFESS

No.

BETRAYAL

No, you can't run my thoughts.

SUFFER

Yes, all right, I'm good at that.
Nearby, moans. Hear no evil, see no evil, speak no—

EVIL

Light came into his eyes. For a moment he thought it was light from within and he opened his eyes to release some of the pressure. The glare, however, lit the window, reflected in the glass; he saw a cone of brilliant white carbon-light shining down from a spot over Michael's bed. He sensed rather than saw the boys holding perfectly still, tangled in their sheets; he heard the others in the bunker sitting up in their beds, swearing, then laughing, and beginning to taunt.

Heavy bootsteps thundered down the length of the otherwise darkened room. P.J. saw the Monitor and two aides come swimming out of the shadows, juggernaut reflections in the wet mirror.

"Take them," said the Monitor.

The aides seized the boys by their hair and pulled them from the bed, screaming like uprooted mandrakes. P.J. turned over, though he had wanted to feign sleep, and saw them dangling, pale and
flushed, struggling with the aides. Within that moment they were hauled into the dark, and their cries were dragged with them the length of the bunker.

The Monitor remained a great deal longer than that, standing with his hands on his hips, scowling at the offending bed. Eventually his eyes rose from the strewn sheets and met P.J.'s gaze.

He suppressed a shudder. The Monitor grinned, winked, and the light snapped out. He shut his eyes. It was at least ten minutes before he heard the bootsteps going away, but in all that time the Monitor never moved—only stood there, in the dark, watching.

***

"Why should this disturb you, Peter John?"

P.J. shook his head, but there was no way to dislodge the voice in his head. On the view-screen of his mind, he could see the recreated Monitor gazing down at him, a silhouette radiating hostile gray-green rays.

"Please respond," INRI said.

P.J. tried to avoid the question, but there was nowhere to turn. He was already deep within himself, meshed with INRI, perceiving an abstract, symbolic landscape of parallel lines and confusing spirals, wherein he was a floating student dressed in khaki robes and INRI was a sourceless voice.

"It was the way he didn't do anything," P.J. said at last. "The way he watched me when I couldn't see him, even though we were both in the dark."

In the spaces between the lines, eyes of all shapes and sizes blinked open and began to stare. INRI spoke on, as though comforting him. "There's nothing wrong with watching. There are eyes everywhere, Peter John, watching everything you do. There are eyes that watch not only your physical actions, but all your mental acts as well: eyes that watch your intentions, your dreams, your desires. You must, therefore, have all the right desires."

"I have no desire except a perfect death," he said in a hollow voice, "howsoever it may come."

"Very good," said INRI, patting him on his symbolic head. "But it may be awhile before your internal patterns completely match the slogans. That's why you still have doubts. Keep up the good work and you'll be there in no time. In

the meantime, we will discontinue our lesson early today. It's time you were transferred to another camp, the headquarters for my central processor. Before you are removed bodily, I would like you to meet some of your future campmates. They're a little older than you, but I think you'll get along splendidly."

P.J. found himself standing in a reproduction of a field, among fresh craters. The little grass still remaining was wet with dew. It might have been any of the practice battlefields where the Christian Soldiers trained, except that it was perfectly quiet, and thus was quite unlike any of the battlefields he had ever seen.

Four figures walked toward him, three men and a woman stepping lightly on the wracked earth. They held up their hands in greeting and the gesture was friendly enough, but when he looked beyond their hands, at their eyes, he recoiled from what he saw there and nearly stumbled backward into a ragged hole.

"Now, Peter John," said INRI, "these are your friends. With all your concern about being watched, they should be of some comfort.

They will never watch you. They are too busy looking within."

The orbs that rolled in the eye sockets of his 'friends' were red and raw, as though pupil and iris were engaged in looking straight backward into the brain, the optic nerve having been severed to further this process. "Granted," said INRI, "they have been with me for nearly a year now. It should be awhile before you catch up with them."

"Their eyes," P.J. whispered.

"They no longer need them. I see for them, as I shall see for you. Nothing so messy and primitive as a fibrous contraption of rods and cones and lenses will come between you and the infinite, Peter John, for you shall dwell in me, and I in you. I will be your eyes, your ears, your thoughts, your every deed. And Peter John . . ."

The four had stopped, facing in different directions, as though they were looking for P.J. but could not see him.

"In me," said INRI, "you shall live forever."

"What do you want with me?" P.J. screamed. None of the four so much as bent toward him. "I don't want to be like them. What are they doing? What use are they now?"

"Be patient, my little lamb. As yet you are not close enough to me. My indicators show that you have not yet taken me fully to heart. When the time is right, you shall know your special destiny. I could force it upon you now; I could slip into your skin and move that movable part of you—your soul, as we say—into my memory, there to dwell forever. But would that be fair, when you have not earned the privilege? Now say goodbye to your friends until this evening, when you will meet in the flesh."

The four blinked out, the craters and the field dissolved, and P.J. came back to his own senses, tangled in INRI's hood. The gloves fit like manacles today. He tore them from him, full of disgust; the hood inverted with a leathery rustling sound, and fell limp from the desk console like the trunk of a dead elephant. He ran a hand through his hair, aware that he must have looked wild to anyone who might have been watching. But there was no one else in the INRI terminal room.

He staggered out of the dim quonset into bright afternoon sunlight. Squinting, he crossed the grounds to the back door of the cafeteria and rushed into the steaming kitchen. The attendants gave him his special ration of chilled Host—Good Sam had arranged extra feedings to follow his grueling sessions with INRI —and he went back out to stand in the shade and gulp down one cube after another.

By the time he finished his lunch, the whole world was glowing again. A warm tingle spread through his stomach, extended into his limbs, filling him with strength; his head still felt a bit weak, but the taste of Host reassured him. INRI wasn't so bad. Camp was actually fun. The Christian Soldiers certainly meant well. And soon he would have new friends.

"Hello, P.J."

He jumped, as though INRI had caught him wading willfully into naughty thoughts. The voice was a little like INRI's, but the owner of the voice—now stepping around the corner of the cafeteria—was much different.

It was that man, the one he'd seen some days ago and thought he recognized: Ash.

The man held out his hand. "P.J. Johnson, am I right?"

P.J. hesitated, wondering if he should run back into the cafeteria. He was nervous, not only because he seemed to know this man — and this man, him—but because he was afraid of what would happen if they were seen together. Good Sam could easily have glanced out of his office and seen everything.

"It's quite all right." the man said, dropping his hand and coming a step closer. "I asked Samuel if I might have a word with the INRI prodigy. The news of your proficiency has spread quickly."

"Is that all?" P.J. said, trying not to sound too suspicious. INRI would want to know all about this.

The stranger laughed. "There's a bench. Would you like to sit?" P.J. shook his head.

"All right." The man hid his smile, but it remained, mocking P.J. silently from the depths of his eyes. "I know what you're thinking. You don't want to talk with me, because you're afraid INRI will reach into your mind and learn of our conversation. But what if I told you that you could escape INRI? That you could learn to lie to it?"

It, P.J. thought. How strange it sounded to hear this man call
INRI 'It' and not 'Him.'

"That's impossible," he said. He started to say more, but fear gripped him by the jaws and trapped his voice.

The man nodded. "I understand. You have been reconditioned. Your mind was scavenged very thoroughly in your first days here; now it is being filled up again with select details, bits and pieces of memory that you'll soon forget are not your own. For instance, I see that you do not remember me, although you've met me many times."

"I saw you once last week. That's all."

"So you believe. But do you remember much of anything before last week? Try and remember me." The man was teasing him. "Listen to my name and see if it helps. Listen to my name:
Ashenwriste. Andrew Ashenwriste." "I don't know what you—" Ash, he
thought. Ashenwriste.

"I'm a friend of your family," Ashenwriste went on quickly, glancing over at Good Sam's office. There was no sign of anyone coming to investigate. "Do you remember them? Your parents?"

P.J. could not remember any parents, though he had a vague memory of remembering them on the day he had first seen Ashenwriste. Many mornings ago, in the chapel, he'd had strange visions of a place that had seemed familiar then; now it was all lost to him, like a dream of which he could remember nothing except that it had seemed significant.

"My parents gave me to Sam when I was a baby," he said.

"Who told you that?"

It was a long time before he could bring himself to admit it: "INRI explained it all to me."

Ashenwriste looked disappointed. "I am sorry," he said. "If I could have spoken with you any earlier, I would have. It was too difficult at first. They had you under intense scrutiny at the time of the PSA treatments."

"You know about those?" P.J. felt the first breaching of his fear, heard it in his voice. "The Periscope?"

"A little. I know that you told them many things of interest concerning your home. You see, the Soldiers don't know that I deal with your neighborhood. They've been slavering over the details they extracted, but saying nothing specific; it's as though they'd like me to be jealous."

"I don't have a home," P.J. said wistfully. "Or if I had one, I can't remember it."

"No doubt. INRI holds your memory in its claws. No one can blame you for having told everything you knew. More than one
Cartel spy has been picked over."

"No!" P.J. shouted, for Ashenwriste had touched a sore place he had never known existed.

BETRAYAL

"No . . . what did I tell them?" "About what?" said Ashenwriste.

"About my home!"

"What home?"

The man's calm drove P.J. crazy. A fresh seal was breaking, bit by bit, and through it came traces of information he had thought forgotten. Faces drifted up to him, along with names that hung disconnected for a moment then slowly matched themselves with the faces.

Virgil, Nancy, Mom and Dad, the babies, the twins.

"Easy," said Ashenwriste. "You mustn't show too much emotion."

He could remember his bedroom, his friends, the humiliating circumstances of his flight from the neighborhood. It all seemed different now, and he would have given anything to be back there. Cobblestone Hill was so small and vulnerable, full of things and people he had loved—still loved.

"What have I done?" he said, raising his hands toward Ashenwriste. Now he remembered the Cartel man standing at the edge of a Sunday picnic crowd; he was the one who took the group photographs, never including himself in the pictures; he played umpire in the kids' softball games, but never went to bat. "What have I done, Mr. Ashenwriste? I told Good Sam and INRI everything
I knew about the neighborhood. I—I'm afraid."

"Good," Ashenwriste said, no longer mocking him. His face changed so swiftly that again P.J. was confused, lost. "You have given the Christian Soldiers a great deal of information they could have gained in no other way. But it will stop soon. If you keep on training with INRI, you will become the ultimate weapon: you will be the key to a complete invasion, from the inside out. School lessons will be subtly altered, water supplies supplemented with drugs of
INRI's making: devastation of the most sinister kind."

P.J. felt as if he were about to cry. He grabbed at Ashenwriste's hands, but missed as the man stepped backward.

"Help me," P.J. whispered.

Ashenwriste put a hand on his shoulder. "Let's go see Good Sam, shall we? It would look better to walk as we talk."

They started across the dusty lot toward headquarters.

"I've come to warn you to expect interference tonight. Your trip to INRI's base camp will be interrupted, apparently by the pagan guerrillas who continually harry the Christians; but I will be behind the attack. Run to the side of the road at the first opportunity, give three quick whistles, and they will find you."

P.J. could hardly believe what he was hearing. He could not let himself show excitement, for INRI had taken to stamping that out of him,

"You're taking me home?" P.J. said.

"As soon as I can. It would be ideal if you could stay with INRI, fool it into believing that you are a convert and play the spy. That way the soldiers could perhaps be diverted into less destructive channels. But there is no way to do this without putting you at greater risk; you have no training in such matters."

"No," P.J. said, shaking his head. "I'm a typist."

It was the first thing he had said in days that made him feel like he was alive, and not merely an extension of INRI.

Good Sam appeared on the porch of the administration building, rocking his crosier slowly from side to side. He ducked his head at the two of them, smiling.

"And how did you find our star student?" Sam asked.

"A superior brain," Ashenwriste replied. "You must be reluctant to send him up to INRI."

Sam's eyes grew wide. "Oh no, Mr. Ashenwriste! We wouldn't dream of withholding privilege from our youth."

Ashenwriste looked at P.J. with eyes that betrayed nothing: a casual conversation was all that had occurred between them. "Good to meet you, Peter John." P.J. bowed, feeling wooden.

A moment later Ashenwriste walked into the building and Good Sam closed the door on both of them. P.J. turned slowly, dazed, and headed back toward the cafeteria, his mind full of new thoughts. He was on KP tonight. And after that . . . escape.

***

They came for him during his evening meal, when the euphoria of a full stomach was upon him. The Host had become his favorite food. He could eat it at every meal. Far more than the smack of salmon, he enjoyed the rush of electricity that the orange food gave him with every bite.

As he sat quivering, wondering if he dare ask for thirds, he felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to find Good Sam smiling down at him.

"Peter John, if you are finished, I'd like you to come with me immediately."

The others in the cafeteria watched this summoning with veiled relief; only now, with some sense of himself restored, could he recognize the look that had come into their eyes since his sessions with INRI began. As he had grown more distant from his companions, closer to the computer messiah, fear alone had bridged the gap.

Of course, his closest friends were gone now anyway. Michael he had not seen all day. Jeremy, allergic to the Host, had never returned from the infirmary.

They crossed the dusky lot to the administration building. A jeep was parked in the lot, on its door an emblem P.J. had never seen before: a human eye with a plug-in socket in its pupil. Two guards in khaki robes stood by the jeep, kicking crusted dirt from the mud flaps. They stopped to watch P.J. pass, as if he were a new kind of weapon.

P.J. was thankful when the door closed behind him. Good Sam led him down a hall to an office where another man stood over a desk with his back to them, examining some papers.

"This is Peter John," said Good Sam.

"Ah!" The man turned around, startling P.J.

He was Good Sam's identical twin.

"Don't stare, Peter John," said the Sam who had come in with him. The other beamed at P.J.: it was the same look of watery, paternal benevolence that all the children knew in Good Sam. They were both so similar that they had to be clones—like Lyndon Baines and Lady Bird, who were equivalent in every detail except genitalia. "It must be the first time he's seen two like us," said the second Sam. Each of them put a hand on his shoulders. "Are you surprised, lambkin?"

P.J. nodded only slightly. "You're clones," he said.

The two Sams started at the same time—it felt like a shock running through him. They released his shoulders; both cleared their throats and started to walk around opposite sides of the desk toward the single padded chair. When each saw where the other was headed, he stopped and chuckled abruptly, and made a gesture toward the empty seat.

"I insist," said one of the Sams. "This is your office. It looks so much like mine that I sometimes forget."

The first Sam conceded and took his seat, then folded his hands and bowed toward P.J.

"You are leaving us this evening, as you know. I just want to say what a pleasure it was to be part of your education, and to thank you for the help you have given us in our investigations." P.J. decided that it would be safest to say nothing.

"We wish to show our gratitude by presenting you with a token of our esteem, your first trophy in the competition for the gates of
Heaven. My good brother, would you please?"

The second Sam opened a cabinet at the side of the room and wrestled out an oblong parcel that was almost as tall as either of the men. It was wrapped in white butcher paper, with a fat red ribbon at its end.

"Open it," said a Sam.

P.J. advanced slowly, took hold of a crease in the paper, and tore away a long ragged strip. Blank eyes peeked through the rent. He tore away more, revealing a sealed mouth, a plastic face, brown acrylic hair. The last of the paper came off with a shriek and rustled to the floor around the feet of the manikin.

It was P.J.'s height exactly. It wore the clothes he had worn the night he stumbled into the Church of the Open Road. And around its neck was a tag that said "Peter John Johnson." "I don't know what to say," he said.

"This replica will stand in your stead in a church of INRI's choosing," said a Sam. "It will sing hymns and pray and be there to be seen, while you are off sacrificing your time and physical presence in less sanctified surroundings. They also serve . . ." "I'm very honored," said PJ.

Both Sams were gloating as though he and not the manikin were their possession. "And now," said the Sam who remained standing, "it's time we moved on."

***

Headlights pierced the darkness, catching on rags of mist, tangling in scotch broom, fennel, copper-clad madrone. P.J. hunched over, hugging his knees, his face growing damper and colder with every moment that they sped through the fog. The pale, rugged road vanished ahead of the tires time and time again, and each time he would think, This is it—they've dug a pit, a jeep trap. But each time it was merely the crest of another steep hill, and they would plunge over it—if not comfortably, at least in safety. Good Sam sat in back beside P.J., while the two guards rode up front.

"I understand you met your future comrades this afternoon,"
Sam shouted in his ear. "How did you all get along?" P.J.'s shivering made it easy not to answer.

Seconds later he had a better reason. The driver, without warning, swung the wheel hard to the left; he had only a glimpse of the tree that lay in the curve of the road, and then they were rolling. He was flung from the jeep and came down hard with his leg bent under him; the landing would have been jarring, might have broken the leg, if he hadn't come down in a thicket, then dropped into mud. He seemed to slide and spin for a long time, until the trunk of a tree arrested him.

There was DOV-fire, hissing followed by angry bursts that shook the ground. P.J. lay with his hands over his head and waited for silence. What was the signal? Three whistles. His brain felt fogged, his face numb, but he managed to blow three weak notes into a moment of silence.

Voices came closer, above, then footsteps crackled through the brush. He tried pulling himself up the slope on his elbows; his leg tingled and would not quite work, and when he twisted his hips his whole right side began to burn.

"Here," he croaked.

"Got you," said a man, and hands caught him under his arms.

When they reached the road, he tried to stand, but found he could do it only with support. The man who had helped him up now let him lean on his shoulder; there were other figures in the night, rushing back and forth. A crashing sound made P.J. look back, and he saw the jeep disappear over the edge of the road. There was no sign of Good Sam or the guards. His saviors were all dressed in black uniforms, and in the dark it was difficult to make out faces.

"Hurry it up," someone called, a hoarse whisper.

"He's hurt," said the man under P.J.'s arm.

"I'm all right," P.J. said, half-gasping as he spoke. He drew away from the man and took a few steps on his own, feeling sensation return to his side as he did so. His hip bones felt tender, but intact.

"Hurry!"

Through the trees at the other side of the road, in a little vale that was all shadow except for the greenish light given off by a few cold-looking canisters, a long multi-segmented vehicle was parked. It was hollow within, fitted with benches like a boat, and protected by sliding glass canopies. P.J. was pressed into the prow of the vehicle, and left in a compartment that sparkled with light dripping down from the underside of a dashboard. The craft shook and began to

move. P.J. put his face to a tiny porthole where he could see nothing outside but the night until his breath clouded the glass. The motion of the car was slow but rolling and silent. He lay back among bundles of plastic-covered gear, catching his breath, listening to the soft voices of the others above. Finally a hatch opened and a wiry little man ducked in.

"Are you hurt?" His nose was beaked, his hair curly and beaded with moisture; in the weird light of the compartment he resembled a troll. "There are medical supplies."

"I'm all right," P.J. said. "Are you Ashenwriste's friends?"

"Cartel, that's us. We're nosing on to safe quarters, so you can get some rest."

"We're heading home?"

"Underground. Your neighborhood's in the other direction."

"But Ashenwriste said—"

"Relax." The man put a hand on P.J.'s shoulder, pressing him back into the sloped shell of the prow. "There's been too much activity in the south to go that way. At the first opportunity you'll be taken home."

"What kind of activity? Is it the Christian Soldiers? Something I told them, and now they're moving in on my home?"

The man smiled, a tight and nervous grimace. "Nothing that dramatic yet. Surveillance, that's all."

P.J. beat his fist against the wall, turning his head away, ashamed. "Because of me," he said. "I told . . . I told . . ."

"Who wouldn't have, under the circumstances? The Periscope can make anyone gossip. Look, kid, it's no use kicking yourself silly over it. We're doing what we can to help."

"Help who?" P.J. felt a righteous rage rising in his breast. "Who, my family or Good Sam's militia? You've got customers in both camps, don't you? Don't you?"

The man held out both hands, palm up. "We walk a very fine line. You should show some gratitude." "You should go to hell," P.J. said.

"I've been there. PSA, just like you. Cartel spies don't get any special privileges. I probably screamed louder and gave away more secrets than you'll ever know."

P.J. clamped his mouth shut.

JUDAS

The words, in flaring blue letters, died swiftly; but they had surprised him, shooting across his eyes.

"INRI!" he whispered. "He's here!"

But the man had gone away.

P.J.'s fingers were in his mouth; he chewed his nails and waited for the next caption.

***

He was awakened by a jolt. The porthole windows were still dark. He felt it again—another shock. The floor lurched up, then changed places with him. He fell among a load of equipment. All motion ceased.

When no one came to check on him, he crawled toward the hatch and found that it was open. He stepped through it at an awkward angle; the craft had come to a stop tilted on its side.

Moonlight through acrid mist: the deserted deck of a ghost ship, foundering in ferns and broken branches. As he looked closer, he saw that it was anything but deserted. Black bodies lay everywhere, draped over the lower edge of the car and under the benches, in broken positions. Ground mist seemed to be settling into the hull of the craft, seeping through the shattered glass canopy; his steps stirred it up and the smell came to him, stronger than before. His eyes stung, he began to choke, and dizziness came quickly. He staggered toward the earth, leaned against a splintered fir; sap oozed between his fingers, the smell of balsam cleared his head, and he looked up, thinking to run from the wreck, wondering at last what had happened, feeling himself stuck to the tree—

Then the rush of feet came down the deck behind him and he was struck by something large and heavy, pitching him this time into a more complete darkness.

VEILED THREATS

The seasons passed in Yosemite, though no one had been sure if they would or not. The mild early summer gave way to a sweltering August, which was followed in turn by a swift and disturbing autumn. After the leaves of the

deciduous trees had changed to orange, they turned shiny black in a matter of minutes, then vanished completely without doing anyone the favor of falling to the ground. All hope of natural verisimilitude had been forsaken long before by the increasingly bored and panic-stricken Johnsons. The park rangers were omnipresent enforcers of irrational, ever-changing laws, duty-bound to make their stay as unpleasant as possible, while at the same time ensuring that they did not leave.

The only help offered by the program came in the form of the old-timer whom they had met upon arriving at the park. He showed up from time to time, as winter came on, with handy tips on how to make hunting and gathering tools from common objects in the Venturon. The Johnsons, however, stopped trying to sustain themselves by wildcraft after Nancy dug a hole looking for roots and found, beneath the topsoil, another of the blank spots that beleaguered them. No one wanted to become like Virgil, who only occasionally stopped laughing at his hand to stare at them all in perfectly lucid terror. Besides, they found that they only slowly became hungry, over months and months.

And so they lived in Yosemite, rousted thrice nightly by rangers from wherever they had parked the Venturon, and pursued in the day by fading memories of what their lives had been like before all this. The tourists went home in October, but long before then the Johnsons had become attractions. The guides on tour buses were constantly pointing them out: "To our right, if you're quick, you may see a family of nonindigenous Johnsons scavenging for something to do. Hi, Bill!"

The first snowfall caught them by surprise. It came like a deluge of video static, hardly settling on anything, a downpour of squiggly white lines, little specks and blips of light. Unreal as it was, it brought the cold with it.

"You know what I think?" Dad said. "I think we're coming to the end of the program. Maybe we're going through some kind of leader and we'll end up in spring."

"Or maybe we'll be erased," Nancy said.

When the sky cleared, they looked up at the sour brown stars, the apathy of each Johnson once more penetrated by fear. The night sky looked chipped and translucent, as if it had been played too many times. The tape might be decaying. Whatever had gone wrong with the program could be fatal: this was not a waiting game. It was no sort of game at all. What if, out in the real-time world, no time at all had passed? What if time never passed again out there, simply because they were stuck in here, in no-time?

"Mommy, I'm cold," said Stephanie, who had begun to talk in the summer.

"You'll be all right, dear," said Mom. "Wrap up and get in the van.

"It's cold in the van, too."

"I know, dear. It's cold everywhere. Try to sleep."

Stephanie coughed all that night. Connie was up with her for hours, until Nancy volunteered to take over. In the cold van, while the others covered their heads and tried to sleep, she watched her sister grow weaker, paler, sicker. The bubbling in her cough intensified until it sounded as though she would drown in herself. Toward morning, the coughing and wheezing ceased, awakening Nancy from a fatigued trance.

Stephanie stared at the ceiling, her eyes like drops of dried glue.

Dad shouldered the little body, took a bottle of vodka from the cabinet, and set off into the woods with tears freezing to his face. He did not return for three days, and when he did he shrugged off their questions.

"There was nowhere to bury her," he said. The recent events had gouged through whatever tenderness remained in his personality, and uncovered permafrost beneath it. "Everywhere I dug, it was blank. I couldn't drop her into that."

He lurched to the cabinet and opened it, found another bottle of alcohol, and then dropped heavily into his seat at the front of the van. He did not speak another word for hours, and then he said, "One night the snow covered her up. When it melted in the morning, she was gone."

The depth of winter:

Mom was in mourning. Virgil slept nine hours out of twelve, mumbling of Herodotus in his sleep. Dad never stopped drinking. Nancy and the twins no longer went out hunting bears, no longer watched the windows for the old-timer's appearance, since the last time they'd seen him the snow of static in his beard had started erasing his face. P.J.'s ghost, as though aware of its error, came no more.

Snowbanks wiped out the landscape. Half Dome was obliterated in December. The Washington Column vanished as easily as if all its granite had been grey light in a mirror. The forest went next. Snow covered the ground and never went away. One night the sun set and did not rise again.

"We have to do something," Nancy said, but she never had time to decide what. There was an unbearable racket in her ears and a sudden light that gave her a headache—

"My God, haven't you been in there long enough?"

She opened her eyes to see an old woman bending over her. There was something familiar about the face, though it seemed like years since she had seen it. The silver plastic frock was of the sort the seniors wore at Sunset Ranch. Her

mind, rising at a dizzying speed from the depths of dream-winter, clued her in to the old woman's identity as she watched her remove the plug-in attachments from the rest of the family.

"Grandma!" said Nancy. "How—how did you find us?" Virgil groaned and sat up, blinking and rubbing his hand. Grandma Johnson moved on to Stephanie and the twins—the grandchildren first—then Connie, and finally to her own son.

"Grandma!" cried Lyndon Baines. "We're home!" said Lady Bird.

"I tried calling you about the wedding yesterday," she said. "No one answered. I finally had to watch your family hour last night to figure out what had happened."

"The processor," Virgil said. It was the first sensible thing Nancy had heard him say in months. "It trapped us, Gran. How long were we plugged in?"

"I hurried over right away," she said, as the twins hugged her from either side. "It took quite a locksmith to get me into your house. I guess you were in there about eighteen hours."

Dad moaned, holding both hands to his eyes. "God, I need a drink."

"Mom," said Connie. She put out her hands to welcome her mother-in-law. "I'm so glad you're here, we—"

She broke off suddenly and turned to Stephanie, who lay unmoving among the plug-in equipment.

"Stephanie." She crawled to her daughter and touched her cheek.

Stephanie began to cry: "Mommy, where are you? I can't see you."

"Open your eyes, darling," Connie said.

Stephanie did so, and looked around with a grave expression. "I had a nightmare, Mommy."

They all began laughing and talking at once—all except Dad. "What the hell happened to the processor, that's what I'd like to know."

He banged out the door and they heard a crash as he threw open the panels in the nose of the Venturon. A moment later he said, "Hah!"

Nancy and Virgil went to see what he had found. He was bent over the workings of the central processor, which was mainly shiny metal boxes and motionless parts that should have been impossible to examine in any detail without special tools. But Dad had found the trouble. With a fat forefinger he pointed out the tiny hole in the lower face of one component. "That's not supposed to be there." "Laser burn," Virgil said.

Dad swore and slammed the panels back into place, so that the false radiator grill interlocked. He bent, with a grunt, and peered at the front of the van.

"It entered here," he said. When Nancy looked closely, she could see a singed pinhole an inch above the fender.

"But where did it come from?" she said.

Dad stood back with his hands on his hips and faced the garage door, his eyes narrowed and his forehead crumpled with suspicion.

He seemed to pierce the garage door with his eyes.

"I have a pretty good idea."

"Why don't you all come inside and I'll make breakfast?" Grandma Johnson called.

"Smith," Dad said, grinding one fist slowly in the palm of his hand. "You're going to pay for this one. Killing my daughter, maiming my son . . . that's too much for any man to ignore. We'll see what the Council says now."

But Nancy could hardly remember what had upset him so much. Her memory of the trip to Yosemite was fading away like the light in a freshly switched-off TV set. Many months' worth of details, compressed into eighteen hours, had become as blurred as a fever dream. The only sharp detail remaining was hunger.

"Dad," she said, putting a hand on his arm. "At least wait till after the wedding."

***

Virgil grunted, shoving the Argos over the last of the wet, resisting sand and into the waves. Suddenly the boat turned buoyant and went leaping lightly over the smallest breakers while cloven plumes of salty spray hissed up from the prow and fell like rain on his back. The evening air was full of mist, turned gold by the sinking sun. Fine gravelly sand rushed away under his bare feet, gritted between his toes, and then suddenly there was no bottom. He braced himself on the wooden rim, his weight pushing the vessel so close to the water that it sluiced in around his wrists. He tumbled forward as the Argos cut through another wave; they rushed on together.

From the prow, rowing hard to get out of the surf, he watched the shore receding above the backs of waves. There were people on the beach watching the sunset, but most of the sun worshipers had already packed their belongings and gone up the cliffs to their houses. No one waved him off, as Elaine had always done. She was not even allowed out in public this close to their wedding-time.

Tomorrow.

This is the last eve of my freedom, he thought.

Out past the waves, he felt the wind come up. Time to unfurl the sail, batten the hatches, avast and ahoy. He was a little rusty at it, and proceeded to get clobbered by the boom or whatever the swinging beam was, and tangled in ropes, while the ropes got tangled in pulleys. The boat yawed and listed and water got all over the fo'c'sle, but at last he was able to set sail for the horizon.

The beach was lost in the spray of breaking waves, though above it the houses stood out like crenellations on the white cliffs.

As the Argos slapped the water, he again thought of Elaine. Tomorrow. Not the ending of freedom, but the beginning of something new. He tried to remember her as he had last seen her without her veils, but the only memory he could find was an old one from the summer when they had finally spoken to each other after years of shy evasion. She was too young in that memory. She had to look older than that by now. It disturbed him that all he could come up with were the nostalgic pictures of fresh love: was that the girl he would marry in the morning? No, she had changed by now, she had to have changed: she'd had at least one speed-treatment last year.

I'm romanticizing again, he thought, accompanying the realization with a mental kick. What if, under the veils, her beauty was gone, and he realized that he'd been loving a stale dream all this time?

Romantic. He was even romantic about his hand.

He raised it before his face, and found that it was aflame with the sunset's fire. The cliffs were like walls of gold now. His eyes kept coming back to his hand. He could not quite remember most of the trip, nor could he quite forget it. He knew that he favored the hand as if it were weak, as if it had suffered some kind of real injury, but that was all part of his endless fantasizing: he was living out a tragic role. His psyche-profile had amply demonstrated that he was prone to let his symbols push him around. He was too impressionable, didn't have a grasp on himself, was vulnerable to his own fears.

He shook his head, hoping the wind would clear it.

Cries filled his ears, the wailing of the damned, lost souls. P.J. Lost.

Alone on the vast choppy surface, he felt small and exposed, but the most likely dangers were all within himself.

The cries sounded again, not ghosts but gulls.

He shivered and huddled down. He had been a wreck since P.J.'s disappearance, and Elaine knew it. Each time he'd talked to her— right up to their conversation this afternoon—she'd sounded more distant, less tolerant of his moods, unamused by his strained bantering.

"No," he groaned. He had to put away these thoughts. He would spoil everything for himself, given half a chance.

The gulls dived closer.

He reached over the side of the boat, scooped up a handful of cold seawater, and splashed it in his face. Another. It felt good, purifying, like all his tears coming out of him at once.

"I came out here to get away from all that," he said, thinking that if he talked aloud he would not get so bogged down in the chatter of unspoken words. "I'm on the Argos now, my good old boat." He slapped the hull. "I built her; I can go where I want. Isn't that so?
Damn right."

Built her by hand, he thought.

"By hand, that's right. Handbuilt freedom. She's all mine." Take her where I want.

"Damn right."

But where have I ever taken her? Out for a turn around the bay? I used to dream of sailing south and never coming back. I've wasted her. Oh God, how I've wasted her.

He had worked on the Argos for years, at first with Dad and then alone. She was his craft, his link with not only nature and the nerves in his hands, but with tradition: dreaming of Greek shipbuilders, he had pushed the lathe. The smell of the shavings had been like an incense, transporting him to a place beyond care.

And in the week he finished her, on the day he first took her into the waves, he had been so elated that he'd finally found the courage to speak to Elaine. And that had been the end of sailing. Almost as soon as the Argos was finished, he had lost touch with her—lost touch with his tradition. Elaine could not sail; she got seasick. He had always meant to get away alone, but it had become such an effort when it was so easy to spend all his time with Elaine. He felt so lonely each time he drifted out to sea while she stayed behind, waving farewell, looking forlorn. He had never stayed out for long. Never long enough, he thought now.

"Talk out loud," he muttered to himself. "Sing it, Virgil. Come on,
O Muses, get me out of my own damn skull, please!"

The Argos seemed to quicken in the water, the wind taking readily to her sails, and all the sounds and sights and sensations seemed as familiar as if he had always been sailing her, tonight.

"Let's go, Argos. Let's go. I'll give you your head, fair ship. We'll let the melting sun take us down the curve of the earth, far off, to other shores. Yes."

They were rushing now, the sailboat and Virgil. The water was like vapor underneath. The sun blazed like the living shield of Achilleus. He could see Hephaistos himself forging the disk in the violet clouds, a brazen god hammering at ripples of light, seizing the sun in ethereal tongs, then plunging it into the cold, deep, wine-dark sea . . .

Night.

The sea dark not with wine, but oil and mercury.

The oil-dark sea, the fear-dark sky.

Turn back, Virgil.

He pulled on the ropes, slipped and almost toppled overboard; his shriek scared off the gulls.

"Elaine!" he cried, seeing her as she had been: a laughing, almost naked girl, sun-browned. "I'm coming back!"

He ducked the sail this time; though the wind and spray had numbed his hands, his mind seemed sharper now and his thoughts clearer. If the beam struck him, it would hurt and leave a bruise. It was not like a plug-in, where all mistakes were corrected automatically—if not immediately then when at last you unplugged.

The Argos was made of moving parts, and he was one of them.

Here, if he got hurt, it would be his fault.

The wind came stronger from the shore, carrying the smells of the land: fresh-mown lawns and smoke. He tacked into it, dreaming of his home, as though it were the far-off place he had always desired.

The answers have to be there, he thought. That's where all the questions came from.

As he felt the waves snatch the Argos up and spirit her toward the sand, he thought he heard Elaine's voice crack out of the breaking waves: "And about time, too!"

***

"The thing I can't believe," Dad said from the middle of the crowd, "is that no one but my mother watched our family hour that night."

Marv Coolidge answered him. "No one was expecting much of a show that night, Bill. Everyone who watches it knew that you'd be away on vacation."

"For what should have been fifteen minutes. What happened to our loyal fans?"

"Ratings are dropping all over. Happened to us, too. Everybody watches their own shows these days."

"That's what's wrong with this neighborhood," said Dad. "Everyone's too wrapped up in his own affairs; we're losing our sense of community."

"Forget about it for now, Bill," said Mom. "This is a day for togetherness."

"That's just the kind of talk that rots us from the inside out," Dad said. "Togetherness. I'm talking about organization. Pledges."

What about wedding vows? Nancy thought, standing impatiently at the doors of the lodge. She could hardly believe that her father was talking about TV with the ceremony about to begin.

Just as the white doors were opening, she felt a hand close on her elbow.

"Nancy, I have to talk to you."

Arnold drew her out of the rush a little too fast and she stumbled in her heels.

"Arnold, what's wrong with you?" she said.

The Smiths, of course, had not been invited. Arnold was in his undersized clothes, glaring at her.

"I'll ask you the same thing. You've been avoiding me. I thought we agreed to stay close after your treatment."

She separated herself from him, but did not immediately join the others. "Arnold, I think we reacted to our treatments very differently. I meant to talk to you about this, but I don't feel as mad at everyone as you do. I tried being a rebel, honestly, and I was a little cranky at first—but I think you're being extreme." "They're giving you tranquilizers," he said.

"Arnold, you're ridiculous."

"Nan, as soon as we hit adolescence they dose us with docility drugs, things that cause us to give in to our family's programming without resistance. They have to. Resistance would ruin the careful shape of the neighborhood." When he saw her disbelief, he looked desperate. "I'm talking about chemicals that induce a sense of responsibility in lab mice! They're in your insta-serves, believe me."

"Excuse me, Arnold, I have to go with my family." She started to turn away—the last of the crowd had just passed into the lodge — but he grabbed her again, harder this time, and spun her to face him.

"Nancy June, I love you," he said, fiercely. "I'm not going to lose you to them."

"Let me guh—"

His other hand blocked her mouth; she glimpsed a small capsule cupped in his palm. A warm bitter fluid burst against her teeth, trickled down the back of her tongue. She jerked back with a curse,

"What was that?"

"The antidote," he said, and stepped out of sight around the building.

She spit into a planter, but the taste was in her throat and her belly felt metallic.

"Nancy?" said her grandmother from the doorway. "What's keeping you? Are you sick?"

She shook her head, wiping her mouth on a handkerchief pulled from her purse. "I'll be all right. I'm coming. I—"

Her knees weakened suddenly and she stumbled against her grandmother.

"It must be the heat, poor dear. Come inside where it's cool."

As they walked into the lodge, she felt very light and far from her body. As soon as she was sitting, she closed her eyes and was carried away by a rush of irresistible somnolence. Dreams were waiting for her: wisps of words, swollen music, the sound of ripping lace. She opened her eyes with a start, only to find the wedding ceremony at its climax, Virgil tearing through Elaine's wrappings to expose the final blood-red shroud. The color first frightened, then enraged her. She fought back a shout as Virgil bent to kiss his lurid bride, for she could see that his pupils were hugely dilated, his lips trembled and his teeth ground together; there was a false lust inside him, induced by stag-drugs so potent that she half expected antlers to break through the crust of his skull. And Elaine—tough and vital Elaine—stood vulnerable and palpitating, weakly waiting to be sacrificed.

Nancy almost screamed at them to stop it.

She could not escape the knowledge that she had never seen so clearly before. This was not a hallucination; she might be the only one here not seeing through a filter. This was happening. They all saw it, but no one else seemed to mind.

With a soft, dragging sound, the red veil was torn, and Elaine's bare white face emerged through the opening.

Virgil's eyes narrowed, and Nancy felt herself choke. She knew that deep down he did not want all this: not Elaine, not the lust, not the ceremony. She could see also that he was trapped, did not even know that he didn't want these things. The veils he parted with his hands were there to distract him from subtler veils he would never suspect, veils that lay over his thoughts.

Mom glanced at her with a smile that looked suddenly superficial. The same doubts that Virgil hid from himself were in her eyes. Looking past Mom at her father, she saw them there, too. But Dad's eyes were different, crazier perhaps, with a strange kind of wildness in them that made her suddenly understand why Arnold respected him. He took his fears by the horns, leapt between them and learned to ride the nightmare beast. He was the only one of them who had accepted all this without seeing it as inevitable or unchangeable.

She must say nothing of this, of course. Not to Virgil, who had accepted his bride. Not to her parents, nor her doctor. Only Arnold would understand.

She did not have to sit still much longer. The ceremony ended in a rush of relatives toward the newlyweds, Johnsons and Wessons now mingling. Nancy did not pause to give her false congratulations, knowing that she would be unable to meet Virgil's eyes. Instead she ran through the doors, under a cross with arms of equal length, and found Arnold waiting for her at the corner of the lodge.

There was no need for speaking; her eyes must have told him everything.

"Let's go to your house," he said.

"My house, why?"

He smiled. "This is the perfect time to get Erica home alone. She doesn't trust me, but you're her sister. My bomb is almost ready, Nan. All I need is what Erica's got, and not very much of that either."

"And then what, Arnold? When you have it? You're just going to wipe them all out?"

He shook his head, and she realized that he was still the Arnold she had loved—the same clever boy. "Oh no, not unless they ask for it. But they'll have to meet my demands."

Arnold surprised her by walking on the sidewalk all the way to her house, instead of insisting that they go through the back alley.

"I'm through skulking," he explained. "My dad knows I'm seeing you. He can't do anything about it. My mom even says we should see each other."

She could see Mr. Smith in the second-story window of his house, watching them with binoculars. She thought about giving him the finger as she had seen Dad do countless times, but decided against it. He was Arnold's father, after all.

When they were indoors, Nancy slipped out of her high heels and put her hand into Arnold's. He tightened his grip reassuringly for a second, then let go of her.

"Where does your mom keep her videos?" he asked.

"What?"

Without explaining, he found Mom's rack of cassettes beside the living room sofa. "I'm looking for a shawl pattern," he said as he slipped a cartridge into the player. "Now we can have some privacy."

"What?"

"When you play the Ladies' Home Video shawl pattern, it blocks the recording power of your home cameras and makes them create new footage from old images. That way there's no record of what we do here. I figured out that all our mothers use them."

"And what do our fathers have?"

"Our fathers are always sneaking around."

He tiptoed through the kitchen and put his ear to the garage door.

"She's probably taking her nap," Nancy said.

Arnold look satisfied. "You go in first. Does she like you?"

"I don't know, she's not like that. She's here for the nuke, that's all."

"Let's pretend we've come to play with her."

"The twins tried that and got bit."

"Could we bring her anything she might like? Anything that would distract her while I get to the nuke?" Nancy thought a moment. "Fuel."

He grinned. "If I had that, I wouldn't be doing this."

She opened the door slowly, expecting to find Erica curled up in her blankets at the foot of the nuke. But before the door was more than a few inches wide, she saw that the baby was sitting up staring at her.

"She's awake," Nancy said.

Arnold stepped past her. "Then it's no use pretending. She looks like she knows what we want. At least she won't be able to tell anyone what happened."

Erica growled at them. Nancy went forward, putting out a hand. "Hello, Erica. This is Arnold. Do you know Arnold? He's my friend."

"Grrrrr ..."

She's gotten meaner, Nancy thought. It must be her diet. She didn't want to tell Arnold, for fear that he would be discouraged.

"Well?" she said.

Arnold surveyed the garage, hands on his hips. "Where does she keep it?"

"The waste?"

"Mm-hm. There must be some kind of holding unit, if we can get her away from it."

"You don't know already?"

"I know the pellets are relatively safe until their seal is punctured in the reactor, and after that—stand back. Where does your dad keep the fuel he hasn't used yet?"

She didn't know whether to laugh at him or yell. "He only buys as much as he needs, but you still don't understand. Erica's the
safekeeper. She eats the waste, Arnold."

A long pause. "Eats it?"

"Yes, and the diapers are put in a special container. I don't think even you could get into that."

Arnold looked a little dizzy, then he looked at Erica.

"I thought her diaper looked heavy," he said. "So it's going to be that kind of operation."

"Do you know how to change a diaper?" Nancy asked.

"Of course I do," he snapped. "You'd better get a fresh one ready. It's just as well that it's this way—with a diaper I mean. I have gloves for handling it directly, but I haven't had any way of testing them yet."

While Nancy pulled a thick diaper from the dispenser on the wall, Arnold moved toward Erica. She had been watching him with menace in her dull eyes all this time.

"Okay, baby," he said. "I don't want to hurt you, I just want to change you."

Erica opened her mouth, baring metallic teeth. They looked like soft lead, but Nancy had seen her bite through all kinds of things: the toe of Lyndon's cowboy boot, for instance.

Arnold stopped to consider his strategy, and Erica pushed off from the nuke and leapt at him with a shriek. He jumped back, stumbled into a bicycle, and fell in the baby's path; but the nuke unit had been jarred by her leap, and as it settled it made a weird sound, knocking and creaking. Nancy saw Erica turn back to it with terror painted on her tiny

wizened face, and at that instant Arnold flung himself upon her. Erica screamed, but not before she was pinned to the floor on her belly.

"Help me, Nan!"

Erica's howls echoed in the garage. The nuke slowly recovered from its shaking and the baby's cries intensified.

"God, I hope no one's listening from the street," he said, fumbling with the Velcro strips on her diaper.

"I thought you said you knew how to change a baby," Nancy said. "She has to be on her back."

"Nan, she's too strong—look out!"

Nancy pulled her hand away from Erica's snapping mouth; she struggled like a cat held under water. Arnold grimaced, his face bright red and beaded with sweat as he tried to wrestle Erica onto her back. Finally he got his hands on her arms just below the shoulders, and Nancy held her legs.

"It would be better if you pinned her shoulders with your knees," Nancy said, "that way you can hold the rest of her still with your hands."

"No way! You know where she'd bite me? Hurry up!"

Fighting the whole time, Erica lost her diaper. Nancy did not look closely at what she'd captured; she was tiring swiftly, and it took all her attention to get the fresh diaper on. She did not bother cleaning between diapers, despite the danger of a rash: there was nothing that looked like it could be wiped up. Whatever was in the diaper rattled, and that was all.

"Okay," Arnold said, "I guess we can let her go."

They both jumped up at the same time, Arnold snatching the dirty diaper and sealing its ends together before Erica could regain it. When she saw that she had been beaten, she gave them both a sullen look and crawled back into her corner.

Nancy and Arnold traded grins and went back into the kitchen.
Nancy got out glasses for lemonade.

"Thanks, Nan. You should probably get back to the wedding."

"I guess so," she said. "Don't you want to stick around for awhile? We could take a nap together."

But his eyes were elsewhere. He shook his head and held up the diaper. "Not today. I've got to get this back to the lab."

She lowered her eyes. "I know."

When he had finished his lemonade they put the diaper in a paper bag and she walked him to the door. Mr. Smith was still up in the window across the street. Oddly, he waved, but neither of them returned the greeting.

Arnold was halfway across the street before she realized that he hadn't even kissed her goodbye. And after all they'd been through together . . .

***

Lyndon Baines Johnson pointed at the widewall screen, where a mob of people in fancy dresses and tuxedos milled, danced, and poured champagne over one another in a large ballroom with gold and black walls. The whole family, except for Virgil, was watching the Special Johnson-Wesson Family Hour in the Johnsons' den.

"There's Nancy, sneaking back in," said Lyndon. "Where were you, Nancy June?"

"Yes, Nan," Mom said, "where were you?"

"It was too stuffy in the lodge," she said. "I had to get some air."

"That's my lodge you're talking about," Dad said, but no one heard him. The sounds of the family were all quite distant, cut off from him by an aural veil. He emptied the last bottle of champagne into a goblet, then drained the goblet. A Laphroaig chaser waited on the arm of the sofa. Connie moved closer at the moment he reached it, jostling his arm, and the drink went down his shirt-front, feeling much cooler than it would have if it had gone down his esophagus.

"Connie," he said. "Connie, look at that, look what you've done."

She didn't look at him, and he wondered if he had actually made a sound. The remote biocontrols that caused his voice to work and muscles to flex seemed out of order this evening; his eyes kept closing against his will. When he tried to walk, he staggered. The reception had tired him. That was it. He had never been big on parties.

"Bill? I said, William Dee, can't you hear me?"

He blinked so heavily that he heard his eyelids meet, and by great concentration managed to equate the voice that had called him with his mother's moving mouth.

"I hear you," he said, pharynx creaking.

Although she sat in a chair next to the sofa, she was several miles away. Her bifocals were down on the end of her nose, ready to tumble into her knitting. A wriggly silver blur obscured her face when he tried to determine her expression.

When he looked away, it moved faster than his head, skimming over the walls, now eating away at the image on the widewall.

"Don't you think you've had enough to drink, Bill?" his mother called. "Ever since I've been here you've had a glass in your hand.
Sober up, for pete's sake—it's my last night with you all."

"I am not drunk, Mother," he said, putting the tumbler-bearing hand to his heart. "I am sick and very sad. Today I lost a son. You can't imagine what that's like."

"Oh I can't, can't I?"

He closed his eyes and found that the corrosive silver whorl was inside his head.

"Daddy," said Lady Bird, "are you crying?"

"For God's sake, Bill, who died?" his mother said.

"Us!" he said, so loudly that they all turned to look at him; it was strange to see them looking away from the TV, and for a moment he felt lost. But he was too adrift, too desperate, to feel self-conscious. "I've lost both my sons," he told them. He put an arm around Connie and squeezed, and when he met her eyes he saw that she was also crying. "Our sons."

"It happens all the time," said his mother.

"It's my fault," he told Connie. She shook her head.

"Your fault Virgil married?" his mother said.

He sniffed.

"Stop feeling sorry for yourself, Bill. You'll just make it worse.
Take your medicine."

"Medicine," he said. "I'll take my medicine."

"Daddy's funny," he heard Stephanie say as he lumbered away.

The wall swam toward him, parted in the middle, and went past on either side. He discovered that he was climbing the stairs to the bathroom, where he had a left new bottle of Dr. Edison's prescription pills.

"Take two, they're small."

"Who said that?" he asked, and almost immediately saw Doc Edison beaming out of the bathroom mirror, the overhead light flashing from the reflector on his liver-spotted forehead.

"Shit," Dad said, relaxing. "Why do you things always get at me in the john?"

"Take four or five," said the doctor. "It'll do you a world of good." All the bottles in the rack looked alike. There was Wheelwright Chem's Tried 'n' True Tonic, Wheelwright Chem's D-Toxicant, Wheelwright Chem's Chocolate-Covered Aspirin, Wheelwright Chem's this and that; they were all in the same type of vials with the same type of orange labels—a shade that hurt his eyes at the moment.

He reached for his tonic, contemplating the warped image of his doctor in the mirror. "What's in these things, Doc?"

"Take six or seven and see what happens. Special today only. Try fifteen or twenty and get another forty free."

"Forty winks?"

Dad put the pills on his tongue and swallowed, wincing at their bitterness. Something was wrong. They had never tasted bitter before; they'd always been sweet and smooth. He opened his hand and looked at the label.

"D-Tox," he said. "Damn it."

"Take the whole bottle, William Dolores, and I'll see you in church."

"I don't think so, Doc," Dad said. He put down the bottle so hard that it cracked. The silvery thing that had been coming in and out of focus—threatening to come even clearer in Doc's brow-mounted mirror—began to wisp away into nothing. Inside his head it felt like the end of a storm, the parting of black clouds.

"Damn," he said. "Never tried that stuff before."

He picked up the bottle of tonic and squinted at the label, taken by his first curious impulse in weeks. The little pills inside seemed to throb. He found himself thinking, for no particular reason, of the beads in a rattlesnake's tail.

"What have we got here, Doc?" he asked.

The mirror was empty.

Dad ambled down the hall to his office, and once inside closed the door. It was nice in the darkness, soothing; he felt himself beginning to unwind. He sat at his desk, switched on the household computer, and opened the little hatch on the analysis bin: a foodtaster he'd installed after the potluck missile crisis, when he was unsure of what Jock Smith might try by way of revenge.

"So what is it?" he asked.

"Wait a minute," said the comp.

He shrugged, sighed, rubbed his eyes. When he opened them again, the screen was alight, crawling with chemical names and three dimensional molecular diagrams. The active ingredient was flashing on and off: the rest seemed to be inert matrix chemicals.

"So what's this?" he asked, pointing at the active ingredient, which was labeled "THP."

"Tetrahydropapaveroline. This substance, isolated from the interaction of acetaldehyde and dopalamine, has been shown to induce excessive alcohol craving in living subjects."

"No kidding? And why would Doc Edison prescribe that?"

He pushed hard at the screen, not a little angrily, and the molecules scattered away from his finger, spinning and broken. Out of the chaos, lines of print began to settle, queuing up along the edges of the screen. Six lines. As he leaned closer, they left the screen's border and intersected at the center of the display, radiating outward, six spines. They spun slowly around their center, so that he could read them all in turn:

Wheelwright's Thrifty-Scot Scotch
Wheelwright's White Crow Rum
Wheelwright's Artichoke Brandy
Wheelwright's Guava Absinthe
Wheelwright's Pesky-Rusky Vodka
Wheelwright's Krafty-Kaiser Fudge Schnapps

Wheeling, whirling, it made Dad dizzy. He sat back from the screen.

"I don't drink any of that dessert crap," he said. "Except the scotch."

At the bottom of the screen, a blinking message prompted him:
INDICES?

"What's an indice?"

"Cichorium endivia, also called 'escarole,' being a composite herb favored for salads."

"You're an aggravating little bastard." He touched the blinking word and sat back as the screen went into its dance.

The six lines receded until they were too fine to read, and as they contracted into the center of the screen they drew more words in with them. Dad was besieged by spinning brand names:

Pep-A-Day Co., Budge, Inc., Spartan Sleep, Freshie Foods Corp., and on and on. They were the names on his appliances, the tools in his garage, the labels on his shirts and shoes, the insta-serves, even the beer he drank day in and day out (Budgetmeister). Everything from Sungleam toasterizers to Naughty-Nite Aphronarcs was there. "What's the big deal?" he asked.

"Wheelwright Subsidiaries, Divisions, Affiliates, Part—"

"But that's everything!" he said. "Who the hell is Wheelwright?"

The spinning letters, still six-spoked, slowed and stopped. A question mark appeared in the upper half of the screen, its period forming a circle around the smallest six brand-name items. The circle began to flash.

"Wheelwright is a corporate entity."

The question mark faded, though the central circle, cut into six equal pie-pieces by the lines of print, remained. Wm. D. Johnson stared into the center of the circle, hesitating, sensing that he was about to ask a question too complex to be answered by the screen, with its simple though captivating diagrams.

He was uncomfortably aware that the name on the lower corner of the comp-console was also on the screen, one of Wheelwrights. And this was a Wheelwright office chair. The photos on the wall were printed on Wheelwright paper. Everything was Wheelwright's. He felt as if he were living in another man's house.

"Right there," he said, poking his finger at the very center of everything on the screen, the place where all the lines converged.

"What is that? Who's behind Wheelwright? What's all this about?"

The text fell away. What remained was geometry: an hexsected circle, its six white spokes radiating from it. There were faint lines in a grid pattern toward the edges of the screen, though they did not come all the way to the circle.

He felt a chill, but his excitement had cleared the last of the alcoholic haze from his mind. That central circle, and what it held, looked familiar. One more Wheelwright product?

"Whiten three sections. Here, here, and here."

He touched alternating sections of the circle: three turned white, three remained black like the rest of the screen. Recognition came, precipitating like crystals out of a clear solution.

"Color the central black areas gold," he said. "Color the screen field green—grass green. Color the lines gray."

The computer obeyed. Something was missing, but the picture in his mind's eye provided it: a stubby-brick red cross with arms of equal length, radiating from the gold and white circle.

It was a picture from the air. The gray lines were streets passing through green lawns to the grids of neighborhood blocks, away from the crucial red building with its dome of alternating gold and white.

He had seen it that morning, he'd been inside it all afternoon. Virgil had been married there.

It was his lodge.

"All right," he said. "Who owns Wheelwright?"

The computer screen flickered, tumbled, and went white. It flashed until he shut it off, but he could not help thinking that it had blinked like an alarm, a warning.

"Who do you think owns Wheelwright?" he asked himself. "Who the hell do you think?"

After the fever and the jostling, drums.

P.J. rose through layers of sleep and sickness, following the pulse of a heart stronger than his own. It sounded like a heart, but there was a voice singing along with it: then it must be a drum. The fever had broken.

With a gasp for air, he opened his eyes. A woman with long dark hair bent over him, her eyes wide and blue as the patch of sky that winked through the translucent yellow-brown ceiling above her. Smoke swirled up into that opening; he could see branches moved by the wind, just beyond.

The woman sat back, took from his forehead a damp cloth that smelled of mint, and went on singing as though to a child. He tried to sit up, but the effort made him groan.

"Not yet," she said quickly, her voice low and gentle. She slipped a strong arm under his shoulders so that he could sit, and with her other hand she put a cup of warm broth to his mouth. He sipped, tasted strong herbs, sighed, and she let him lie back.

"If you want more, tell me," she said.

"More." His throat was raw; he knew he had vomited for what seemed like days, and not only the contents of his stomach. There had been a time—it might have been a nightmare—when he dreamed that he was vomiting words. All the glowing words that INRI had crammed into his skull, under incredible pressure, had spewed out at last. But since that time, even if it had been a dream, the captions had not reappeared. He did not feel INRI near him or inside him any longer.

She smiled. "All right." "I heard a drum," he said.

"That was last night," she said.

"Last night? It was minutes ago."

"It may have seemed that way, in your delirium. You had a dangerous withdrawal, too abrupt, but there was no other way. We couldn't wean you gradually from the clone-food."

"Clone-food?"

She stroked his forehead. "Not too many questions at once, hm? You need rest."

He tasted the broth again, felt it cleanse his palate. "You mean the Host," he said.

"That's what you call it," she said. She smiled at P.J.'s puzzled expression. "Oh, I don't mean to offend you. It's not your religion I disapprove of, it's your tactics."

"My religion?"

She moved away for a moment and he heard rustling. When she returned, she bore a yellowing slip of paper. "You seem strong enough to read," she said. "This is from the Boyston news." Boston, he thought. Isn't that in the East?

BOYS' TOWN CHRONNER

MANNA SPILLS SECRETS TO LOCAL RESEARCHERS

Researchers at the Worlds Beyond Clinic announced today that preliminary testing of the "miracle" clone-food recently retrieved from the New Christian Militia by sylvan traders has proved the substance to be derived from human protoplasm, with added fish flavoring and an as-yetunidentified substance that researchers conjecture is an addictive agent designed to induce craving and create mild euphoria upon ingestion. This is in keeping with the claims of the Christian Army that it possesses a food cloned from the prepuce of Jesus Christ, preserved by a secret monastic line following instructions from St. Paul, who was reputedly given the slip of foreskin as a token of the late savior's affection.

"The Host," P.J. murmured, and it was almost enough to make him sick again. He put his hands over his eyes and moaned. "I ate that? I feel like a cannibal."

"You've recovered remarkably well, considering," said the woman. "Have you eaten it all your life?"

"No," he said. "Not long at all. I wasn't a Christian Soldier—they captured me."

He was surprised to see a flicker of disappointment on her face, but it passed quickly. "Well," she said. "We were hoping we'd finally nabbed a live one. There are so many things we'd like to learn."

Remembering the Periscope, his muscles clenched and he sat upright. "I don't know anything!" he shouted.

"Sh, sh, relax." She put a hand on his brow again. "You're shivering."

He realized that he was in a conical chamber, with a circular floor and a pointed ceiling. Shadows moved on the yellow walls, clustering around a slit tied shut with thongs like shoelaces. He heard a voice say, "Seal, are you all right?"

"Fine," she called. "I'll be out in a moment. Now you," she said to P.J., "lie down again and rest."

"I didn't mean to scream," he said. "It's—the Christians made me tell them everything about my home, and it was so painful."

"You don't have to tell us anything."

"You're the guerrillas, aren't you? Mr. Ashenwriste mentioned you."

"Ashenwriste?" Her eyes narrowed. "With the Cartel?"

He explained how he had come to be riding in the vehicle that was ambushed. He'd had but a few lucid moments since then. In his illness, he had been aware of rough traveling down long cement lanes through untrimmed trees, old highways overgrown with iceplant, signs moving slowly past with strange symbols on them as well as countless warnings: DO NOT PASS, GO BACK, YOU ARE GOING THE WRONG WAY. The guerillas had carried him away, and he had not seen the Cartel vehicle since the night they'd taken it.

"The Cartel prisoners were left to be found by their employees," Seal said. "The vehicle will be useful in our own forays against the Christians. We deal with the Cartel, yes, but on our terms and not theirs. They are too fond of imposing their terms on everyone." "They've always been helpful to us," P.J. said.

She looked a little dubious. "At least they haven't let nuke technology into the hands of the Christians, whose death-wish is too strong. After all, look what they've got to look forward to after death."

"And you're trying to stop them?"

"We're trying to salvage what we can." She put a hand on her breast. "I am not a guerrilla, myself; this is a peaceful community, and there's so little here that the New Christians don't bother us. They've fixed their sights on the cities—the Sodoms and Gomorrahs, the last bastions of Babel and Babylon. In Boyston—old San Francisco—the fighting is steady. The suburbs are a wasteland. I was there for a year, nursing the wounded. That was where I learned to heal. But I had to get out of the city. Now the guerrillas come to me for healing, and I must say, if I were a bit more of a warrior myself, I'd probably be out with them on their raids. But the diseased body is also a battlefield, at times. With you, for instance, it was a struggle."

"And where am I?" he asked.

"Well, this was the guerillas' home, once upon a time. Stanford, it was called, until the New Christians wiped it out."

"Why?"

"They had to. There was a university here." "I don't understand.

Seal shrugged. "The New Christians have their own schools. Staunch the free flow of information and you've got the human spirit by the throat. You know them from the inside; I guess you got the whole sales pitch, hm?"

He shook his head slowly. "It all seems so confused."

"They're confused by their own beliefs," Seal said. "Once upon a time, Christianity created its own enemy and called it Satanism. Everything was a matter of good and evil, plain and simple, black and white . . . but this is a gray world. The two extremes, Christ and Satan, finally merged in the Christian militia. There was always a powerful attraction there; now it's been fulfilled. Christ and AntiChrist in one. Only took two thousand years."

"And a number-crunching computer." P.J. remembered the voracious red-eyed figurine and shivered. It was the first time in weeks that he had thought of it without feeling a surge of automatic devotion. He lay back, head spinning.

"I need some time to think," he said, and minutes later he was dreaming.

***

It was a few days before he was strong enough to leave Seal's teepee. Before then, visitors started coming to look at him, to see the young man from the walled-in residential enclave and hear his stories of life in the neighborhood. The most frequent of these visitors was a boy named Lynx, who first shocked and then fascinated P.J. He was black from head to toe, and it was his natural color. It amused everyone that P.J. had never seen a black person, so Lynx rapidly brought a variety of exotic human breeds for him to meet. The camp was populated by every sort of person, from Indonesia and the Philippines to Mongolia and Nepal, from Peru to the Bay of Bengal. Most of them came from San Francisco families, and had left the city to do their work—agriculture, mainly—in something resembling peace.

The most commonplace facts of P.J.'s life were surprises to the pagans. One morning Lynx asked him how old he was.

"Eighteen over ten," P.J. replied.

"Say what?"

"Eighteen over ten. How old are you?" "Seventeen," Lynx said, looking baffled.

"That's all? Just seventeen?"

"What do you mean? What's this 'over ten' stuff?"

P.J. said, "You mean you're seventeen years old and you've been alive seventeen years?"

"Sure."

He did not know what to say for a moment, but Lynx had framed his question: "Then you're eighteen years old and you've only been alive ten years?"

"Of course," P.J. said. "That's acceleration."

"Acceleration?"

There was so much he had taken for granted, never seen as strange. The walls of Cobblestone Hill had confined his imagination. So many questions he had never known to ask. That led to another hour of explanations, during which Lynx called in some friends to listen. By the end of the session, P.J. was so tired of propping himself up on his elbows, and it was getting so hot in the teepee, that he finally said he was ready to take a walk. Seal agreed. Lynx disappeared and returned with loose clothes—a white tunic and drawstring pants—that fit him.

A few steps were all he managed that first afternoon. Outside, the warm wind took his breath away. He sat on a tree stump and looked out at fields, an orchard, people everywhere, tents and teepees, cooking fires, mesh sacks full of grubby things that looked like they had been dug from the earth. He was content to sit there for the rest of the day, talking to Lynx. As he talked on about Cobblestone Hill, he felt for the first time that he did not truly miss it; in comparison to the boot camp it had seemed like a haven, but he thought this place preferable. Still, he could not escape the knowledge that he might have betrayed the neighborhood by giving the Christians information that would put his family in danger.

"I'd like to go with the guerrillas sometime," he told Lynx. "To see my home, at least."

Lynx looked nervous. "You don't want to do that, P.J. It's war."

"You don't understand; my family might be right in the middle of the war without knowing it. If there were some way to warn people."

"I hear they blew up that church on the coast highway—the one that sucked you in."

"Well, that's good," P.J. said, feeling as if Lynx had switched subjects too fast. "How could I get involved with that sort of thing, do you know?"

Lynx's eyes widened. "You don't want to do that," he said again.

"How do you know?" P.J. said. "Its sounds more like you don't want me to."

Lynx reached out quickly and grabbed his hand. "That's right. You're my friend. I know I haven't known you very long but, P.J., you're important to me."

P.J. swallowed, suddenly thinking of the circumstances that had driven him to run from home. It was too much at once: too much he had not let himself think about. He looked away from Lynx, eyes watering, and stared out at the fields. Heat made the trees shimmer, but it was cooler in the shadows. Such a beautiful place . . .

"P.J.?" Lynx said, softer now.

"I never told you why I left home," P.J. said. "I guess I should try."

It was the hardest thing he had ever done; he did not look at Lynx until he had gotten as far as the night of his escape, and then shame stopped him. He had described how it had happened, without commenting on what he had really felt. Now his feelings, all confused, overwhelmed him, made him dumb.

"Why are you ashamed?" Lynx said. "Do you think it's really something they can plug into your genes?"

"Well . . ." Of course, he almost said. He had never thought otherwise.

"You are what you are," Lynx said. "What does it matter how you got that way? Birth is one of those things you can't blame on yourself. Now if you want to talk sordid histories, you should look at me."

P.J. had to laugh, wiping his eyes. He felt an immense relief. "What?" he said.

Lynx looked around to make sure that they were alone, then pulled up the hem of his shirt several inches. P.J., although he was a little embarrassed, looked. Just above the waistline and below the navel was a bright design, like a tattoo—or an advertisement. But it was not a tattoo. As he watched, it flashed on and off in the shadows, a bright arrow pointing down toward dark curls.

"I had the lettering removed," Lynx said, "but I kept this as a reminder. When I was in the city I hustled for a living." "Hustled?" P.J. said.

Lynx laughed, shaking his head. "I'll explain." He touched a faintly scarred area above the arrow. "The implant, here, used to say Eat."

***

There was a fire burning so high that he kept confusing the stars with its windblown embers. There was the music of pipes and drums. And there was dancing, hand in hand, in a great ring around the fire. He was a little drunk and very high, out of breath, full of more strength than he'd felt since he lived at home with his family. Thoughts of the neighborhood were the only things that haunted him, and even they were not harsh or frightening tonight. Lynx's grasp was firm. Seal played her tambourine. Children ran underfoot, everywhere, shrieking.

Lynx shouted a whisper, "Come with me!" Then he was pulled along, away from the ring. Lynx's broken laughter kept just ahead of him, but Lynx himself was lost in the night, naked.

A tall triangular shape rose, ahead of them, a slot cut from the night; it was a dark teepee. P.J. heard the sound of leather thongs quickly unlaced, then Lynx caught his hand again.

"In here," he said. "No one else will come."

P.J. followed into a musty space; it was blacker than outside, for there were no stars and the firelight was dimmed by the walls. Lynx's hands moved up his arm, brushed his face. Heart pounding, P.J. felt his tunic pulled from him.

There was light: the little arrow flashing on and off in the dark. He started to laugh, but the light was enough to show him his surroundings, and he stopped Lynx with a startled cry.

"Where are we?" he said. "What is this? I never knew it was here."

Lynx sat back. "What's so special?" he said. "It's some of the salvage from Stanford—there's a lot more. Why?"

In the flashing light, P.J. could dimly make out stack upon stack of books. Books of all sizes, all sorts, with covers of leather and paper, with gold leaf glinting.

"Oh, Virgil," he said, "if you could see this."

Lynx's hand closed on his shoulder. "Your brother? Maybe someday he will."

That was the night P.J. knew he would have to return. He did not yet know how, or when, but he knew that the time and the means would come.

This time, Dad thought as he lay awake in the wee hours, it will have to be a perfect strike on Smith. He's gotten away with too much. But I can't be implicated, not at all. And no one in the family —that would look bad. I'll have to get to Jock through someone he would never suspect. Maybe Arnold. Yes. . . Arnold.

Whatever it was, it had better be soon. That thought brought him back to the original worry that had kept him awake this late: he had received his second pink card the previous afternoon, and was very late in making an appointment for acceleration. How long could he get away without treatment? Jock would just love to see him aged and infirm, he was sure.

"Visitors," said the bedside clock, whispering in case he was asleep, but whispering insistently. Connie snored once, explosively, as he rolled over onto his side and looked at the time.

"At four o'clock?"

"Shh," the clock cautioned. "The missus . . ."

For a moment, Dad was unsure of his wakefulness. No visitors would dare come up to the house. They must be out on the sidewalk, speaking to the mailbox. He sagged back into his pillow, an arm over his eyes, wishing only to remain in the warm bed.

But the bed was determined to rouse him; it was a conspiracy of his automated household. He was shaken, then chilled by his half of the mattress, until at last he was so uncomfortable that he could not bear to stay under the covers. His robe swayed out of the wall on an extension, like a flaccid skin. Once he'd slipped into it and cinched the belt, he tried to leave the room, but the extension would not release its hold on his collar. At last he pulled out and went from the room naked. Junior sputtered in the closet as he passed.

The shades were drawn across the office windows, allowing him to approach them openly. In a faint trickle of streetlight, he cautiously pulled aside the shade until he had enough room for one eye to look out at the lawn. Then he put that eye to the gap.

Five figures, unmoving, stood boldly yet in robes of furtive black at the edge of his yard, fog flowing around them. One of them beckoned, waving him down.

Slowly he stepped back, letting the shade fall, and put a hand to his mouth. The Whelk Grand Council had come for him. He might have known it would be like this.

Would it be an inquisition or an initiation? Either way, he had to face it.

On tiptoe, or the nearest he could manage, he crept back into his bedroom and began to dress for chill weather.

***

"I have some simple questions," Connie said. "That's all I'm asking these days."

The coffee-table computer waited for specifics. In the screen she could see her face reflected, the smile-lines fixed as if gouged there, the natural planes of her expressions forced beyond the breaking point. She touched a spot just under the right cheekbone and pushed a sliding joint back into place; fatty deposits slid into their lubricated pouches beneath the eye sockets, and instantaneously she looked several years younger, though she did not feel that way. These days she did not feel at all the way she looked. Everyone told her how lovely she was, complimented her smile, and it was true that she always smiled. That was the way her face was built. The smile, which slipped into a grimace overnight, was screwed back into place each morning before Bill saw her. Lately, she had been thinking about loosening the screws a little; it would be like letting down her hair. People could take her as she was, or leave her.

"This should be easy for you," she said, enjoying having someone to talk to—someone who, unlike Stephanie or the twins, her usual partners in conversation, would listen without argument. "You know almost everything there is to know, don't you?"

The coffee table ignored rhetorical questions.

"First, where has my husband gone, really?"

A note flashed onto the screen, in Bill's sloppy light-pen cursive:

> Con—Business trip, had to run, may be a few days. Wm.

"I've seen that already," she said. "I don't believe it. I found this in his sock drawer."

She held up a pink card, addressed to her husband, notifying him that he was overdue for his acceleration. The computer gaped and clicked until she fed the card into it for examination.

"This card came from the office of Dr. Ralph Edison. It informs

Mr. Johnson—"

"I can read. I want to know if he went to the clinic and not on a business trip, or if he made up some 'trip' so that he wouldn't have to get his treatment."

"In-patient records are classified. There is no record of Mr. Johnson affirming his appointment on the house line, however."

She sighed, propping her chin on her knuckles. The house was still; Nancy had taken the children to the beach for the day; Junior slept in his closet. So quiet. She could almost hear the sloshing of the liquid crystal clock.

She eyed the Ladies ' Home Video warily, recalling her shawlpattern discussion with Nada. Bill knew all about these computers; what if he had some way of getting into her secret conversations? It would be just like him. If he thought that she was planning to have an affair, it would be even more like him to run out and have one first. Her fingernails dug into her chin. Business trip? There was no business that couldn't be done through a plug-in. There was nowhere to go and no way to get there.

Nothing outside.

Thinking of P.J., who must be dead, she thought she would begin to weep. But a dry sound wracked her throat, as if she had swallowed sand. She couldn't let herself start crying over a lost child or she would be crying forever. Little by little she had been trying to limit herself to dealing with the present, where there was quite enough to take care of.

She rose, a little uncertainly, for it was dark in the house. All the lights were off in order to keep the headaches away. She felt them circling around her like wolves, closing in, and darkness was some protection.

As she climbed the stairs, the base of her neck throbbed as though with a touch of fever.

Leaning into Bill's office, his sanctuary, she hesitated. Stray, pointless thoughts fluttered around the edges of her mind, flickering like moths until she batted them away. They were selfish thoughts. She couldn't worry about things like where she had come from, or why she was here. She couldn't change any of those things. She had to be practical. Where, for instance, was Bill? That was a question worth asking.

There was no clue to be found on his desk, but of course there wouldn't be. She expected to find the drawers locked, but they were open—worse, they were empty. There was not a scrap of paper or even a pencil in any of them. He must have left all his work at the office.

His console.

"You can't use that," he always said. "You have to be a skilled IMR typist. You have to learn it young, get it into your blood, you know. Like P.J. He's a whiz."

Like P.J., she thought, but not like Bill. When had he ever learned how to type?

It must be easier than it looks. Probably about as complicated as a holiday. I always see him smiling when he's plugged in. What if he doesn't work at all? What if he's got nothing there but a one-man plug-in vacation?

The thought made her quiver. She slipped into his chair.

"On," she said, and the system began to purr. Light spilled over the desk, speckled her hands. She found the IMR-gloves resting on the arms of the chair and put them on; and then, somewhat clumsily in the gloves, she struggled to get the hood over her head. For a second she suffocated in darkness, but the eyepieces moved into place with slight suction and she found light flashing into her eyes, pulsing, and she relaxed. Her hands tingled. Electricity raced through her spine.

Where was she?

Black curtains parted ahead of her and she moved into a dusty, yellow-lit hallway. With a start she became aware of her body— a heavy-set male physique, dressed in a gray suit. Everything seemed dim and out of focus, including herself. Her steps were heavy, plodding, and hardly carried her down the hall.

She approached a door, one of many, moving with incredible slowness. Mr. Johnson was painted on the frosted glass pane.

Monday, she kept thinking. Monday. Sigh.

Poor Bill, she thought in spite of herself. Every day he comes to this.

She was almost afraid to open the door, but she did. There might be a clue to his whereabouts.

The place lit up as she entered. She gazed into a room that surpassed the hallway in drabness. Steel desks, cork partitions, rows of filing cabinets. The hands of an enormous antique clock were frozen at five after eight. Stacks of paper covered the nearest desk, and on the topmost sheet of the tallest stack she saw in huge red letters:

NEED YOUR COMMENTS ASAP

Her hands, in the gray sleeves, trembled. She felt exhausted, weak, thirsty, as though the dust of the office had settled into her pores. She backed out of the room, turning off the light as she went, and continued down the hall in

search of a fountain. A constant clicking sound emanated from the walls on all sides, no louder than the rattling of her teeth, and her headache finally seized her.

With a moan she turned to the nearest door, where the sound of clattering—it must be a typewriter—was very loud.

CENTRAL FILES

Someone here should be able to help her.

She went in, but found herself in an aisle of filing cabinets. There was no one typing, no room in fact for a desk, and the sound she heard came from beyond a door at the far end of the room. When she saw the name on it —Men— she started to leave, but the clamor coming from behind the door kept her a moment longer. It sounded like someone scrabbling at the knob, a trapped person hoping to get out but knowing that there was no one in the room he could call out to. Of course, she had come in silently. The knob quivered and shook in its socket, turned a little in either direction, but it did not quite open.

So the door was locked from outside. How simple to remedy. Her head felt better, now that she had found a solution to some problem, however small.

She crossed the room quickly, her steps sounding loud and clear to her ears; the whole scene brightened as her mood lifted. The scratching and rattling stopped as she unlocked the door. She could hear him shifting about inside.

And then a thought: what if it were Bill? Could he have gotten stuck in the men's room? No, there had been a note . . .

"You can come out," she said in her manly voice. "I unlocked it for you."

The door opened swiftly in the hand of a shadow. Beyond the opener were layers of blackness, darkening successively into the distance. It hardly looked like a restroom.

Four figures stood in the dark. None of them was her husband.

"Hello?" she said.

As they came forward they put out their hands, but she hardly cared when she got a look at their eyes.

Bits of raw meat.

Backward. She banged into a high metal shelf covered with colored forms and boxes of paperclips, and set it rocking. Before it fell she got the doorknob in her hand and escaped into the hallway; as the door closed she heard a crash, but she did not wait to learn if the four with torn eyes had survived. They had not looked like they could be stopped so easily.

In the hallway, everything was quiet and dim and slow again, the yellow light full of dust. She ran toward the curtains at the far end of the hall, wishing that her body were lighter, her legs more agile. Motes of dust hammered against her face. At last she staggered into the dark, and came to herself in the gloves and the hood, at Bill's desk. She was covered in a light sweat, shaking.

She was out of the chair and downstairs in seconds. In the kitchen she shoved a glass under the faucet and almost drank down a glass of blue dissolving liquid; she poured that out and filled the glass from the other tap, and drank to soothe her parched throat. Leaning against the counter, she looked around as if expecting to see those four come in from the living room; but the house was still silent.

She went to the phone in the den and pressed the emergency button. Dr. Edison or a phone-answering simulation appeared on the screen.

"It's not a medical emergency," she said.

"What's the problem, Constance?" the doctor asked. "Random panic?"

"Tell me who to call," she said. "Computer control? The employment office? I went to Bill's plug-in office and these people without eyes . . . I mean, they had eyes but they weren't right."

The simulation flickered. "Say that again? You went into his office?"

"I plugged into his job. I was looking for him, doctor. He said he went on a business trip, but where would he have gone?"

Dr. Edison shook his head. "He's been avoiding his treatment for some time, Connie. I think he's afraid. You know Bill—he's a big frightened kid at heart."

"But where could he—"

"Now, Connie, relax. Let's talk about you. You say you went into his plug-in? Those packages are highly personalized, you know that.
Didn't you think you might be intruding?"

"I wanted to know where he was, do you understand?"

"I think so. Let's look at your motives, shall we?"

"My motives?"

He smiled reassuringly. "You sound a bit hysterical."

"Well, I'm upset."

"Exactly. But why?" And here his image was replaced by a tricolor bar chart. Along the bottom were numbers from o to 100 —Ages. Along the side were various symbols she did not recognize. "Connie, take a look at yourself."

A red X appeared on the chart, marking the intersection of Age 45 and something that looked like the logo for Channel 6.

"At your age, all women with your profile confront the same issues. Your childbearing years are behind you. Your reproductive system, frankly, has nothing better to do than turn on itself. When this happens, Connie, you can expect to experience various psychological disturbances, including suspicion, dread,
hallucinations, lethargy, hysteria. I think that's what we're looking at in your case. It's simple enough."

She felt cold looking at him, as if he really were nothing more than a phone-screen.

"You haven't heard anything I've said."

"Certainly I have," he said. "Every word you've said has been a clue to your health of mind. You feel uneasy, and you feed your imbalance by suspecting your husband of who knows what? Why else would you invade his privacy? Then your psyche projects your invasion back upon itself, triggering delusions, and you see yourself as though in a mirror. You are the one with the wrong kind of eyes. Those are your eyes, Connie: wrong because you are looking in the wrong place for the answer to your problems."

"I can't believe this," she said, and stabbed again at the Emergency button.

"Oh, it's not your fault," he said. "Blame biology."

"Get off my phone."

"Fortunately, your problem is easily solved by science. I would have suggested this myself sooner or later."

"What are you talking about? Why won't you let me contact someone who'll help me?"

"I want to help, Connie. I can do it. I think we should schedule your hysterectomy immediately."

"Oh, I don't believe this!"

She disengaged and spun away from the screen, repelled by the thought that his image might return. If it did, she didn't want to know about it. There was no time to think over what he had said, however, for the doorbell was ringing.

The opalescent panel by the front door showed a thin man, rather tall, with a narrow chin, receding brow, ingenuous eyes. It was the first time that she had seen him without paying unusual attention to the two outstanding characteristics that were usually all she noticed: namely, the silver-streaked muttonchops and pastel suit. For some reason, standing there with his hands crossed over his groin, shifting from foot to foot, he looked like an ordinary man, harried and uncertain. For a moment he reminded her of Bill as he had been about four years ago—ten years younger.

Without bothering to interview him, she disarmed the hedges and opened the way.

"Come in, Mr. Ashenwriste," she called, overcome by a sense of relief.

When he saw her he smiled, raised a hand to his temple, and came in quickly. She saw that Jock Smith had deserted his post for once. She closed the door behind him and heard the metal plates slam shut outside.

"Well," he said, "it seems that we're locked in for the night."

When she didn't know how to answer that, he grinned. "So to speak. Your house has one of the more remarkable security systems on Cobblestone Hill."

"Thank you," she said. She motioned toward the living room. "Please come in. Would you like something to drink? There's a menu on the coffee-table console."

"All right. Thanks."

As he went deeper into the darkened house, he looked around and seemed to listen to the silence.

"Is your husband at work?"

"No, he's—he's away."

Mr. Ashenwriste looked uncomfortable. He put his hands into the pocket of his pastel suit and turned to her. "That's unfortunate. I'd hoped to go over the nuke with him—make sure there were no problems with the installation.

"I'm sorry he's not here. He'll be disappointed when I tell him you stopped by."

Mr. Ashenwriste sat on the sofa, considered the coffee-table console, but apparently decided not to order anything.

She found herself watching him, waiting for his next words. His thin red lips glistened, the shadow of tongue just beyond them. She felt as if a bubble were expanding in her stomach; she was a little afraid, but only a little.

Why not him? she thought.

He apparently caught her thought, for his mouth twitched abruptly and he turned to look at the console. "Well, mineral water sounds good to me."

She watched him intently, knowing that she was about to go beyond the point of no return. How quickly she had come to it! Although he would not look at her, he obviously felt her eyes on him; she was unable to temper her gaze. Not

half an hour ago she had been all practicality, her concern for Bill almost obsessive; now she felt no less practical, only more fatalistic. Bill was away and that was that. Where he had gone was his business.

"I'll get that mineral water," she said, and left quickly to give herself time to catch her breath and gather some composure.

So what if she did, and what if she didn't?

She extracted a glass of sparkling water from the beverage unit.

Nada would approve. The ladies of Cobblestone Hill and Laurel Woods considered Mr. Ashenwriste's muttonchops very distinguished; some had tried in vain to coax their husbands into pastel suits.

She found that she was amazingly calm, calculating the kids' probable time of return. Bill might be a few days, depending. Jock Smith had not even seen Mr. Ashenwriste enter.

Mr. Ashenwriste.

She set his glass before him and said, "What is your first name?" He smiled up at her, looking a little muddled.

"Sweeney." "I'm Connie." She gave him a smile.

He sipped, cleared his throat. "Aren't you having anything?"

Shaking her head, she sat. Her eyes wandered over the dark walls, family pictures, trophies on the shelves. Here, she thought.

We'll do it here.

She put her feet up on the coffee table. I have nice legs, she thought.

He didn't say anything for several minutes, only stared at something in a corner, until she asked, "Mr.—Sweeney, was there something else?"

He looked scared. As he started to put down his glass, she reached out and touched his hand; it was lightly furred, soft. He surprised her by first shivering, then turning his hand over to grasp hers. When their eyes met, every light in the room turned on without being touched.

She gasped and pulled her hand away, but the lights stayed on. Mr. Ashenwriste, white-faced, jumped up and patted at the air with fluttering hands. One by one, the lights blinked out. He looked over at her slowly. "Oh, my." "Did you do that?" she asked, getting up.

"I'm afraid so. I shouldn't have but I—I lost control."

"Is that something the Cartel lets you do?"

He smiled sheepishly. "I'm linked in."

She took his hands again and found that he was shaking. "How wonderful. Maybe we should have some light. A little?"

He nodded tentatively and a lamp in the corner hummed up to about the brightness of a candle. "How's that?"

"Nice," she said. She sank down into the sofa cushions, drawing him with her. When she touched his jaw, below one ear, another light came on and went out immediately.

He sighed, brushing her cheek. "It's distracting."

"Not to me," she said. "Let it happen."

"All right." Leaning forward. "I will."

What followed was a summer storm, with lightning.

***

It should have been a splendid day for sailing. The sky was clear, the wind strong, and the Argos handled like a dream. He was away at last, a full hamper of food stored beneath a bench, the shores of home falling away behind him. The water was impossibly clean and blue. He set his eyes on the western horizon and let himself be carried toward it, onward, ever faster.

And then a line of twenty pelicans dipped past, each with a letter painted on its side. Together they spelled out: SEE ELAINE IMMEDIATELY.

"Shit."

He threw up his hands and closed his eyes, already feeling for the hood and pulling off the gloves in a single entangling motion. It was so easy to forget the IMR equipment, until something reminded you that it was there; and then it became unbearable.

"Virgil, I need your help," said Elaine. She stood at the other side of the desk, her arms full of wadded cloth, waiting for him to extract his hands from the inverted gloves.

"I'm on work," he said angrily, but not without a guilty stammer. Work was a joke. His first PIJob demanded nothing more than idle fantasizing, with an occasional call to monitor some dreamlike process of computation. He was not even

convinced the computation amounted to anything; more likely it was there to make him feel useful. Even the dreariest tasks were set in remote, beautiful spots. And on his lengthy breaks, he was free to invent his surroundings and companions as he pleased.

"So am I," she said. "Do you know how to make a bed?" He almost laughed. "What? That's automatic. Do you have to do everything the hard way these days?"

She flung the sheets at his head. "The bed's broken. I'm sure you must remember how it happened, my little acrobat."

He blushed, flexing his leg, which still ached from the twisting it had taken.

"As for doing things the hard way, Virgil, if you want a fast baby you can bake it yourself."

He got up, taking the sheets in the crook of his arm. "The timebake is perfectly safe."

"Well, I've never trusted it."

"But your body is perfect, is that it? Sorry. Your womb's a hell of a lot more prone to downtime than a time-bake. Nine months is too long to trust something as complex as a baby to your body, Elaine."

"We could both be old by then, is that what you mean?" She sighed. "Forget it. I'm not having this fight again."

He stopped halfway down the hall to their bedroom and put a hand on the wall. On the back of that hand were a few gray hairs.

Only a few, he told himself.

"I'm not getting old," he said loudly.

"Oh, Virgil," she laughed. "It happens to everything. Don't be so poopy. Kids will keep you young, you know—real kids, like we all were, until the ovens."

"Were," he said, looking at the streaks of silver in her hair. The first traces of senescence—planned obsolescence—had made her look classy, enhanced her beauty until it was right out of his league. In his case, age merely made him look more worn down than he felt. He knew he would never write another inspired thesis; his research had come to an end, and no new brain cells would be forthcoming.

He threw the load of sheets through the door of their bedroom, watched the white shapes spread out and billow to the floor.

"The floor's filthy!" she screamed. "What are you doing?"

"I'm not wasting my time making a bed," he yelled back, and turned down the hall.

"Where are you going?" Her voice was low and sounded dangerous.

"To work," he said. "Before I get fired. Which would be your fault."

"Go then," she called. "You can make your own bed on the sofa tonight."

He hesitated in mid-step, but momentum kept him going. After he had slammed the door to his office, he sat down and stared at his terminal. He wished he had a book to read, pages to turn, words to follow, but whenever he created them in the PI—even if they were books he had read a dozen times—they came out with blurry letters, and the characters stayed flat. He could hear his wife talking to herself in the bedroom, and wondered how it would be when she was senile.

"How did I get myself into this?" he asked the room.

After awhile, he pulled on the hood and gloves and entered the program like a wrestler slipping into an undefined ring, matched against an invisible opponent. He heard the sound of breaking surf and tried to think of something—anything—worth doing with his dreams.

***

"Come away with me," Sweeney whispered.

"Oh, no. I couldn't possibly."

He sighed, and lights in the stairway flickered. "It's such a wide world, Constance, and you've seen so little of it."

"I've seen plenty. Enough." She made sure her blouse was smoothed neatly against her tummy before letting the magnozip on her pants suit fasten the waistband tight. Sweeney brought the lights up quickly, revealing that two had burned out in their passion's electrical storm.

"I'll replace them," he said a bit awkwardly. "No charge."

"You're sweet, but we have plenty of spares."

"Honestly, Constance. Come with me." He was pleading, though she couldn't imagine how he had become so emotional over her so quickly. "There are places you would never imagine, where we could be safe. Underground. The Cartel, drilling for fuel, once discovered an incredible network of caverns—measureless to man. We could go there and no one would ever find us."

"The Cartel wouldn't tell my husband where we'd gone?"

"They . . . wouldn't know for certain. It would be a swift, secret getaway. Please."

Don't cling, she thought fiercely, suddenly irritated by him. She started to urge him from the couch, but he smiled and caught her hands, at which point she found herself turning his palms upward and kissing him on the inside of each wrist. How confusing.

She drew back slightly without letting go of him.

"How could you give up your job like that? You're a grown man.
You shouldn't be talking of running away."

"You don't understand. I've never had anything, anyone, I could call my own—the Cartel doesn't allow it. Being with you this afternoon, well, it's shown me a whole new world—a world more exciting than anything the Cartel could offer. I feel like an outlaw now."

"Outlaw," she whispered.

Her eyes wandered past the edge of his arm, distracted, and lighted on the video rack by the sofa. "Oh, God!"

"What is it?" he asked. "Constance?"

The Ladies' Home Video sat in the rack, unused all this time. "It's on record," she said. "It's all on record, Sweeney. Tonight it will be on TV for everyone to see."

Ashenwriste sat down with a soft thud in the middle of the sofa and blinked owlishly. He looked pale and helpless in his pastel undershorts, engulfed in tatty cushions. Helpless, when what she needed now was someone with the courage and raw strength to face Bill when he came home and saw the reruns. Either that or someone with Arnold Smith's intelligence, a man who could revise the household tapes before prime time. But she could hardly entrust Arnold with such a task.

"Constance," he said, as if dictating a formal letter. She was impressed anew by the sense of authority he could convey, even unclothed on her living room couch; making love to him, she had begun to take him for granted. Now, though, the entire Cartel seemed to speak through him as he said, "You must come away with me."

"Sweeney, I . . ."

My God, she thought. I could do it.

"Can't possibly . . ." It would be very easy.

"But how?"

He smiled, leaning far enough forward to catch his lavender pants by the waist. "There are secret ways in and out of your neighborhood. No one would know."

She pointed at the camera above the mantelpiece. "They would now."

He wilted. "I'm not used to such scrutiny."

"Hold on." She hurried to slip the Ladies' Home Video into its cradle so that they would betray nothing else. Not that there was much left to betray. Only her family remained.

Be practical, she thought, and sat down next to him with the skin of one knuckle nipped between her teeth. Nancy, the twins, poor Stephanie. And then she thought of Junior, even now closeted. Perhaps he was wailing, upstairs in darkness, and she could not hear. It was as if he weighed a million pounds, as if the second-story floor creaked beneath his weight, as if the boards might rupture at any moment and she would be smothered in baby fat.

"I have to think this over," she said.

"There's not much time."

She shook her head. "If you only understood. My responsibilities
—"

"Are to yourself, Constance. I can only tell you one thing. I love you. I have never loved before, but I know this is it."

Connie stared down at the shag, feeling herself flush with anger and uncertainty. "I don't know."

One thing was certain. Everything had changed. She knew for the first time in years that she was not reliant on William; if anything, it was the other way around. One afternoon of this had shown her that she could do as she pleased. If she stayed, it would be different, too difficult. She and Bill would fight. The children would struggle to avoid the clash of their parents, but ultimately fail. There was a self-perpetuating pattern of pain here whose rhythm she had broken this afternoon. By staying, she locked them all into it; but if she left—took the children with her— anything might happen. They would have a chance at freedom.

She looked up at Ashenwriste. "What about Nancy, the twins,
Steph—"

"We'll have to come back for them. There's no time now." "Can we really do it?" she asked.

"You'll go?" He clasped her hands. "I am so glad." The decision made, she felt her heart lighten.

"Pack lightly," he said as he finished dressing. "No more than will fit into a small bag."

"But what?"

"Isn't there anything you can't leave behind?"

She thought a moment. How could she leave any of it behind? It was not as if she were a young girl who could run away from home and leave nothing undone except chores. She was . . . how old, really? The speed-treatment had clocked her at one age, but now that skin fit her body. It was time to shed, time to free the younger Connie within. She must leave it all, or leave none of it.

The alloy shutters whirred, and the front door started opening. The laughter of children came through the gap. Before they had come up the front path, she'd pushed Sweeney ahead of her into the kitchen, and from there into the garage.

"Mom?" Lyndon called.

"She's probably shopping," Nancy said. "Let's get cleaned up before she comes home."

Connie eased the door shut. Taking Sweeney's elbow, she motioned toward the back door.

"We'll have to go around the back," she whispered.

"What's that?"

Baby Erica dragged herself into their path, teeth bared, and began growling. Her eyes glistened in the dim light.

"Hello, darling," Connie said.

"She's beautiful," said Ashenwriste, all Cartel once again.

She growled even louder.

"Shh!" Connie said, rushing forward. She tried to snatch up her daughter, in order to rock her into silence, but Erica made a shocking lunge at Connie's ankles and her teeth met with a snap.

"Here," Sweeney whispered, distracting the baby. Connie pressed herself against the back door and watched her lover crouching to stroke the babe who separated them.

"Something's upset her," she said. "Please be careful."

But he had something in his hand, a small cylinder that rattled. The symbol of radioactivity was printed on its cap. Erica quieted, fascinated by it.

"There we go," he said, and rolled it into a corner of the garage.

She scurried after it. "Out," he said to Connie. "Hurry."

In the backyard, all was calm. The only sound came purring from the compact turbine generator assembly that was hooked up to the garden hose, handling most of the Johnsons' energy needs. Connie realized that the Cartel must have kept its connections into her home, even though it was an independent energy source now, otherwise her appliances would not have been so sensitive to Ashenwriste. Bill's freedom from the Cartel, then, was largely illusory. Of course, it would be. The Cartel leased the hardware to its customers; the Cartel controlled the fuel that was making gas and oil obsolete. Bill's dream of self-sufficiency had always been just that: a dream.

She led Sweeney around the side of the house to a gate. "Where are you parked?"

"Just down the block. I—"

She followed his eyes to see what had silenced him, and when she saw what he'd seen, she was unable to speak.

A man was waiting for them on the sidewalk. A man in a pastel suit. He looked like Sweeney Ashenwriste, exactly.

Whose hand, then, did she hold? Two Ashenwristes? The nearest, her lover, narrowed his eyes, looked for a moment like no one she knew; with his lips drawn back he was a demon of rage and suspicion.

"They've caught me already," he said.

"Who is it?" she asked a bit timidly.

"My brother," he said, reaching for the latch on the gate. "My clone."

Before she could stop him, he threw the gate wide open and rushed onto the lawn.

"Wait, Sweeney!" She ran.

She was barely in time. The sentry did not recognize him, as she had known it wouldn't; the house lasers had burned holes in the pastel cuffs of his sleeves and trousers before she caught his arm. "I have to escort you," she whispered. "What are you going to do?"

They reached the edge of the lawn. Her lover's mirror image gave her a polite nod, then fixed his eyes on Sweeney. "I didn't think you'd be coming out the front door, not after that power surge."

Sweeney pulled away from her, his face red—with fury or embarrassment, she could not tell. He grabbed his brother's arm and drew him as close as he could to the lawn without pulling him over the edge.

"What are you doing here?" he growled.

"I've come to spirit you away."

"To arrest me?"

The other shrugged. "If you like."

"And for what reason?"

The second Ashenwriste sputtered a laugh. "What reason? Your telemetries sent the remote needles into the red—red for lust, I imagine. You didn't expect the Cartel to send flowers to the lucky girl, did you?"

"Shut up."

"Now, now. Lower your voice and I'll lower mine. Keep your grip —pretend you're threatening me and I'll keep smiling to damp my telemetries. You're lucky I was nearby and they could send me to pick you up. I can help you get away if freedom is all you want."

"You know it is, Andrew."

Connie noticed movement above them: the smirking face of Jock Smith. He frightened her. Of all the people to see her sneaking out with a salesman, it had to be Jock. She had always liked the Smiths; Bill was the one who waged wars, dreamed up reasons for vendettas, pushed grudges to the flashpoint. Why the fear? Was it because she no longer trusted anyone? Anything? She felt like a goldfish that had shattered its bowl in its struggle to be free, and now that all the water had run out she was drowning in fresh air.

"Sweeney," she said, her throat dry, aware of how exposed they were. The children might look out and see them at any time.

"Throw me," said Andrew Ashenwriste. "You'll have to knock me out cold—but not until I've told you what I know."

She clapped her hands to her mouth as Sweeney bent and threw himself into his brother. She half-expected them to merge into one Ashenwriste, but they merely rolled to the sidewalk, grunting and moaning. Through the panting she heard one of them—it must have been Andrew—giving what sounded like directions. She glanced back at the still facade of her house, then looked at the street. The block was deserted except for Jock, and now Doris, both looking down.

Andrew blocked a punch. There was a long moment of straining in which neither brother moved. Andrew said, "The guerrillas . . . have him . . . you can . . . guess where . . ."

Sweeney released his brother and the other flew over him, tumbling to land flat on his back, one foot trespassing on the Johnsons' lawn. Connie pushed the foot out of the way before the lasers could focus.

"Where?" Sweeney said as he straddled his brother and clenched his lapels.

"Old forest rendezvous. He might be in a pagan camp, but we're not sure about that. But if you're outlaw now—"

"I am."

"Then they'll take you in. And her. The boy will want to see her."

Connie knelt as Sweeney hauled Andrew upright. "What boy?" she said, her pulse suddenly thunderous in her ears.

But Sweeney had drawn back his hand, curled his fingers into a fist, and now he punched with all his weight. Andrew dropped back, his head cracked against asphalt, and his eyes rolled as the lids fluttered shut.

"What boy?" she screamed.

Sweeney caught her and pulled her away from his brother. "He's out, Constance. Come along, my car's right here."

She tried to tear away from him. "What boy? What boy did he mean?"

"Your son, P.J., of course. Please hurry."

They left the other Ashenwriste prone on the sidewalk and ran to the Cartel convertible. He opened the door for her and as he went around to his side she watched the Smiths coming out of their house, stepping tentatively down their front path, advancing on Andrew Ashenwriste.

"Constance."

She jumped at the touch of his hand. "What?" His eyes were serious. "Whatever happens—" "I can't say I love you," she said.

He closed his mouth with a snap, the lines around his eyes tightening for her to see. He gave the car a curt command to take them away.

Nancy answered the door when no one else would stir from the television. Leaving her siblings behind, all chewing insta-serve dinners and watching the commercial channel as if nothing were out of whack, she hurried down the hall to the front door and in the viewer saw Arnold standing on the sidewalk.

"Well," she said, considering letting him stand there all night—or as long as she liked. She pressed the speak button and saw him jerk as the mailbox crackled: "Don't move, Arnold. I've got the house guns aimed on you."

"Nan?" He looked and sounded puzzled.

"That's right. I'm surprised you remember my name after all this time. I vaguely remember you."

"It hasn't been that long. I've been busy building—you know.
Can we talk?"

She didn't answer immediately, but stood cleaning her fingernails. She wasn't supposed to have anyone in the house when her parents weren't home—an old rule she barely remembered, because Mom so rarely left the house. But she could go out; that was no problem. The kids could take care of themselves.

A moment later she sauntered down the walk and stopped a few feet from Arnold, still within the protective periphery of her own yard. Arnold swayed from foot to foot, hands deep in his pockets so that an inch of his belly showed between the hem of the shirt and the low waistband. The pants were small on him; it looked silly, but it also made her excited in a certain way.

"Well?" she said.

"Come out in the street where no one will hear."

"There's no one to listen," she said, pulling her hair back into a ponytail, which she released a second later while stepping out of the yard. They went to the curb and sat down. He made a limp attempt to capture one of her hands, but it was too easily evaded. His heart wasn't into it.

"What is it, Arnold?" she asked when he had moped long enough.

"I'm afraid, Nan."

"Of what?"

"That they found me out."

"Who?"

"The Cartel. Ashenwriste came over today. He came in while I was out, and when I got home he was talking to my dad in whispers. They must have tracked down the missing plutonium."

"Don't be silly. Mom handles that, and she never noticed a thing.
She would have said so. They won't find out."

"You think so?" His eyes widened with the hope that she could reassure him. "The Cartel guy didn't even look at me, that's true. But
I'm still nervous. I've had the bomb too long. It's time to use it."

She nodded. "All right. My parents aren't home, so if you need help . . ."

"Come home with me?"

She wished she had a sweater, but they weren't going far. Only across the street. As they went, she grabbed his elbow and tucked her arm through his, suddenly feeling as if they had been separated for months, missing the warmth and reassurance of his presence. Things had not been quite what she expected after the last treatment. She had to scrabble to remember her dreams of how she and Arnold would make a life together. Well, she thought, this is also a life. We're revolutionaries.

At the last minute before stepping onto Arnold's porch, she looked up at the lit windows of the second story and saw his father looking down at them. Mr. Smith pulled away from the glass, as if shot down.

"Your dad's acting funny," she said. "I told you he's crazy. Come on in."

"Won't he mind my coming over?"

"He has it in for your dad, not you. Don't worry about him. He'd never hurt a kid."

Mrs. Smith surprised them in the hall. "Nancy! I haven't seen you here in ages. Would you kids like to have some popcorn balls in the
TV room? We're just sitting down."

"Nah," Arnold said. "We're too old for popcorn balls. We'll be in my room."

"Thanks anyway," Nancy said, trying to make up for Arnold.

Once they were in his room, which was strewn with wire and tools and half-dissected electronic components, he motioned with a grin toward his closet. "It's in there."

She started toward the door but he caught her hand. "No, wait. I've got an alarm set up. Let me disconnect it first." He pulled up the corner of a blanket that draped from his unmade bed, and twirled a dial on the bedpost. "Okay."

She was about to open the closet door when she heard a gruff but high-pitched broken laugh behind her. She knew it wasn't Arnold when she heard him say, "What are you doing? Get out of my room."

She whirled quickly and saw Mr. Smith come in and shut the door behind him. He stood with his head bobbing back and forth at the two of them, while one hand still played with the doorknob. His shirtfront was filthy, the material rubbed thin and ragged; it must have been weeks since he'd used a recycler. Didn't Mrs. Smith ever get after him about his appearance?

"Come on, dad," Arnold said impatiently. "Stop drooling and get out of my room."

"I was waiting," his father said, his voice running up and down the scale. He pointed at the bed. "You turned off your alarm, now I'll take your little toy for myself."

"How did you know?" Arnold said, and then he swore. "You won't!" He threw himself at his father, banging him into the door. Arnold might have bruised one of his father's ribs, broken something, but there was no evidence of pain in the elder Smith's expression. It looked like all he could do now was smile.

"I'll do what I want," said Mr. Smith, pinned against the door.
"You're a baby and you can't stop me."

"I'll disarm it; I'll tell the neighborhood!"

"And what were you going to do with it?"

Arnold shot a swift look at Nancy.

"My father will stop you," Nancy said, wondering if Dad had any idea of Mr. Smith's condition. Was it Dad's fault, she wondered? Had that afternoon with the missile sent Mr. Smith over whatever the edge he'd gone over?

"You think I care about your father?" he asked. "When I'm done, he'll be radioactive dust, him and his nuke. While I will be safe, safe . . ."

"If you set it off, no one will be safe," Nancy said.

"What do I care about the rest of them? They're all your father's friends. They laugh at my missile, out there at the sixteenth hole. They laugh at me, and my family. I'll be glad when they're gone and we're all alone here. We can make it all alone." Mr. Smith pointed a wavering finger at Arnold. "I've watched you laying your devices around the house. This place is safe, isn't it, inside your shield? It's the only safe spot for miles around." Arnold said nothing, but Nancy could hear his teeth grinding. He must have set his special shield around the house, to protect it in the blast if it came to that. She had always believed that Arnold would use the bomb only for bargaining—a threat. But Mr. Smith, she saw, would have no qualms about setting it off.

"I'll tell my father," she said. "We'll go to Mr. Taylor and the neighborhood police."

"I can be sure that you won't," he said, coming toward her. As he grabbed her wrist, she said, "Don't you dare!"

"Mom!" Arnold shouted. "Mom, help, he's going crazy!"

Mr. Smith opened the door and tugged Nancy out into the hall, with Arnold following right behind. For a moment she thought they would pass through the living room, where Mrs. Smith would certainly protest this rough treatment; but instead they turned aside and went downstairs to the basement and into a small storage room. There were jars of preserves that Mrs. Smith had put up herself, tools, old boxes; and at the back of the room, a door with a spyhole in it.

"There, now," said Mr. Smith, swinging her at the door. She caught herself on her hands, her face an inch from the tiny lens. He must want her to look at something. But before she could peek in, the door opened.

Mrs. Smith smiled out at her, the second before she grabbed her wrists.

"Well," she said. "Here you are, Nancy. I was just putting the finishing touches on your cell."

"You won't get away with this!" Arnold cried.

"Oh, I think we will. Nancy, what do you think?"

She was speechless, her imagination contriving explanations for what was happening. Only the obvious answers came to her. She was a captive. How simple.

Mrs. Smith pushed her through the door; she heard the bolts sliding home. Home. It seemed so far away.

***

A voice as deep as all-engulfing darkness spoke in Dad's ear:

"William Dolores Johnson, you are now a full initiate of the Wheelwrights, the Whelks' innermost circle. Wrightbrother Coolidge, you may remove the initiate's blindfold."

"Howdy, Bill," said Marv Coolidge, his grinning face the first thing he had seen in . . . how long? The bitter potion they'd given him to sip—savoring of machine oil and aftershave—must have had timetwisting effects.

His parched lips cracked in a smile, and from his hoarse throat, ragged from learning the songs of the Wheelwrights, came a ready laugh. As soon as his wrists were untied, he clapped Marv on the back, and the others moved in to congratulate him.

"Marv," he said, "I would never have suspected you were on the Whelk Grand Council."

Coolidge shrugged. "Well, it is a secret society. I mean, everyone knows the name Wheelwright, everyone knows about the Whelk Grand Council, but no one knows they're the same thing."

The nocturnal voice that had welcomed him as a Wheelwright — the same voice that had officiated all of the ceremony, in fact —now gave a hearty, "Welcome in, m'boy. I knew you wouldn't be sucking the placebos for long. Sometimes takes an upset like your boy's leaving—a good solid crisis—to bring out the tensile strength in a man."

"Thanks, Doc," Dad said, and met Ralph Edison's wink with one of his own.

The other men—five in all—were dispersing to a table of refreshments at the back of the room, which was a chamber he had never visited before. None of them were men he had thought were on the council, aside from Doc Edison; Charlie McCormick and Douglas Taylor, whom he'd expected to see, were not there; and he was immensely relieved to see that Jock Smith was not among the members.

Sunlight filtered in from a cruciform window of violet glass high in the sloping ceiling, but it was a dim and fading light— evening light. He realized how anxious he was to see Connie, to reassure her that he had not gone off on any impossible "business trip," but there seemed to be no escape from his newfound brothers. They were determined to celebrate his initiation at length, in numerous toasts.

"Are we still in the lodge?" he asked Marvin.

"That's right, the violet room. This place is full of nooks you'd never suspect unless you were—"

"Excuse us, Wrightbrother Coolidge," said Doc Edison, stepping between them with a glass of dark red wine in either hand. He handed one to Dad.

"To Johnson's nuke!" someone cried, and there was general applause. Dad looked into his drink, feeling a bit flat all of a sudden; he had gotten so used to being on the outer edge of things—the cutting edge—that he was uncomfortable at the center.

"Drink up," Doc said. His hood enfolded his neck like velveteen wattles. "Tell me, were you surprised to see us?"

"On my lawn? Well, in a way I wasn't. I'll tell you, Doc, I'm more surprised by the way you're treating me now. All these guys, I felt like they kind of abandoned me when I went nuclear. Not you, of course—you were supportive of Erica, and ..."

"Ah, Bill, my good old friend. You may have misunderstood." Doc put an arm around his shoulders—not an easy reach—as they walked into a violet ray. "No one ever abandoned you—they all merely insisted on their independence, the need to take their good time deciding which way to go. They respected your vision, you can be sure of that. You mustn't fault them for not blindly following."

Dad felt like a chastened child; yet he was simultaneously encouraged. "I guess I'm always trying to be boss."

"Maybe you don't try hard enough."

"Three cheers for good old Johnson!"

"I don't follow you, Doc."

Edison set his drink on the altar, among the braziers and farm implements that had been used in his initiation.

"You have a managerial character," Doc said, "but you seem to short-circuit your own best qualities. Why, not long ago you were a most active figure in the neighborhood. Your family was strong beneath your banner, Bill."

The violet cross held Dad's gaze. "My company," he murmured.

"Your family corporation, Bill, that's exactly what I'm getting at. Johnson Limited was strong, capable. Now where are you? Connie, I fear, doubts your leadership; she may be heading in directions of her own."

"P.J.," Dad said angrily.

"Can't blame him, no more than we can blame Dave Hiram, who recently left the Wheelwrights over the, ah, matter of your initiation."

"Why? What's wrong with me?"

Doc shrugged. "We all make our own decisions. He felt progress lay in a different direction than the one you took. But progress, m'boy, is what it's all about. You've joined the secret corporation at the heart of them all. Now it's time to take what you've learned here and apply it to the rest of your life."

"Right," Dad said. He briefly wondered how he could apply the Secret Pledge of Technology or the Craftsman's Shanty to the pain of P.J.'s absence or Connie's increasing air of distraction.

I will stand firmly for what I stand for.

I will not stand on ceremony unless it stands on me.

I will stand and not run, unless it is to lend a hand and there to stand.

I'll do my damnedest.

Words to live by, and to leave by.

"Doc, I hate to be the one to spoil this swell party, but I've really got to be getting home."

"Your house can take care of itself, Bill, surely."

"I'm not so sure of that lately," Dad said. "All this"—a wave at the men in the violet light—"has helped me see where lately I've been short-sighted."

"Well." Doc shrugged. "It's up to you, man. Naturally you must not tell anyone where you've been. And the secrets you've learned
..."

Dad put a finger to his lips and winked. Holy cow, he thought, some secrets: "This is the wheel and this is the barrow. Merged in eternity, behold the Great—" That was a secret—shh!

By the time he had said his farewells and convinced the other men to keep on celebrating without him, the violet cross shone only with light reflected from within. In a cramped cloakroom, he exchanged his maroon initiation robe for his street clothes. A cold slithering on his neck reminded him to look at the necklace they'd put on him at the high point of the addled rites.

A silver chain glimmered between his fingers. The medallion was gold, and showed a six-spoked wheel in bas relief on one side. It looked almost like the symbol for radioactivity. On the obverse of the disk was a glyph that made far less sense to him. It must have been some symbol of greater initiation; he could tell that there were wheels within the wheels in the Wheelwrights.

Doc Edison poked his head into the room and said, "Don't forget, Bill. You've got a treatment coming up. All part of your coming of age. You understand?"

Dad sighed. "Of course. And Doc." He put a hand to his belly. "Ever since I stopped the drugs, I've been getting this pain all through my guts. Indigestion, I guess."

"Ulcers. Common enough for someone like you. I'll see what I can do."

"Much obliged."

The door closed and Dad glanced down at the medallion with a wheel on one side, and on the other a stylized eye with extra holes in its pupil, as if to accommodate an electric plug or a PI jack.

***

The walk home should have done him a great deal of good. Lights were on in all the houses; luminous lawn-dwarves stood out upon redwood-chip landscapes, offering tinny greetings as he passed. His head cleared slowly, and after the stuffy heat of the incense-clogged initiation—the torches waved in his face and strange names incanted—it was good to breathe the cool sea air and hear the lawn-birds going on and off around him.

But for all this—despite the surprise of his initiation into the secret heart of the neighborhood; despite the damp breeze and the moving TV lights behind the curtained windows; despite the stars and the night sky, clear for once of fog—he felt uncomfortable. It was as though the rite had been a ceremony of disempowerment. He felt a numbness of mind, the spiritual equivalent of the fingertip tingling that follows the clipping of nails. By welcoming him into the fold, by telling him that he'd really been one of them all along, the Wheelwrights had nipped his independence. He had never felt more helpless than he felt now.

Finally he reached his house at the top of the hill. I have to put all that aside, he thought. Besides, I'll need all my wits to convince Connie I was away on business.

The panels slid away as he approached the house, and after he presented his tongue the door opened. There was no one in the living room, but he could hear the TV in the den.

"I'm home," he called, heading for the stairs. The kids greeted him in distracted voices, though Connie said nothing. It was not until he was up in his bedroom, changing into a sweater, that Connie caught up with him, a little red-faced from running up the stairs.

"We weren't expecting you tonight," she said, putting her hands on his shoulders. She leaned forward to give him a quick kiss. "What a nice surprise."

"It was business," he said. "Just a meeting, but it could have gone on all night and then some. I'm glad it's over, myself."

Smiling, she turned away. He was amazed that she showed no sign of being upset about his sudden disappearance; her behavior made him uneasy.

"Hon, is something wrong?" he asked.

She looked back, eyebrows arched. "Wrong? With me? What could be wrong?"

Confused by his own suspicion, he dismissed it—and her. "Never mind," he said, and after a moment she left.

It's getting to me, he thought. Everything I expected old age to be, and I'm not even old yet. Tomorrow, maybe—but not tonight. I . . .

I, I, I.

Now he thought of Virgil, poor strange Virgil, who had always groped about like an awkward outcast in his own family— rising above everyone else, apart from it all, but still and all a good kid.

Good kid. The words had a false-bottomed sound to them. He'd seen Virgil twice since the wedding: once right after the honeymoon, when he'd delivered the Junior Executive PI, at which time Virgil had looked good—worn out but happy. The next time had been two days later, after Virgil's mandatory treatment. Early middle age had gone over him like a palsied painter with a white touch-up brush. Too old, too soon: Doc must have whipped up a strong batch—or else Virgil, as always, had been hypersensitive.

Thinking of his oldest son—for whom the first treatment had come at age five—now graying and with a receding brow that must have come from Connie's lost side of the family, Dad felt a tear, the first of a string, bead at a corner of his eye. He'd been afraid to call on Virgil after that time; he kept thinking that he should pay his respects.

"I'll call him," he decided. His mood lightened. Someday Virgil might find himself facing the black-frocked shadows on his lawn.

He made the call from the bedroom phone, sitting on the edge of the bed. On impulse, he asked for direct link to Virgil's office, and he was surprised to see his son sitting in his own black leather lounger, apparently just off work.

"Hello, Dad," Virgil said, his voice solemn, his eyes not meeting the screen.

Dad made himself ignore the lines of age, the gray flecks, until he was used to them. The face he showed his son was convivial.

"Good to see you, Virg! I—we've been thinking about you a lot, your mother and I. You and Elaine getting along all right in your new place?"

"Yeah, Dad, sure." He sighed.

"You don't sound too good, Virgil." He couldn't keep concern from his voice; but on seeing Virgil's reaction, he was glad he hadn't.

"Oh, Dad, I don't know." Virgil squinted into the screen, looking for him. "I haven't even spent much time at home since I got this PI. I've been sailing, playing golf, dreaming . . . none of it real. Did you do that when you first got yours?"

"Well, sure. You mean you're not spending much time with Elaine?"

Virgil avoided his eyes again, sitting up and clearing his throat. "No, she's here. There's an Elaine here, but it's not the real Elaine." He blushed. "In here, she doesn't nag." He laughed a little guiltily, and Dad caught a chill that seemed to blow right out of the screen: Virgil's cold breath.

"What do you mean, Virgil? What do you mean, 'in here'?"

Virgil looked at him oddly. "That's a weird question."

"Why? You said it."

"Weird for a sim, I mean." Virgil leaned closer. "You're not such a great likeness, you know. Not a very good William D. Johnson."

Dad patted the bed on either side of him, testing it for firmness as Virgil said: "That's the thing with this Junior PI that bothers me. It's only realistic up to a point. Spelling pelicans, really. I can sit and talk to you or Elaine just as if it were a real conversation, but after a few minutes it wears pretty thin. Like the sky in Yosemite. Maybe the executive package is better."

Dad's voice was dry as though dusted with crumbs. "Virgil. Stay right there, son. I want you to stay there while I make a call. I'll get right back to you."

He cut the link and sat breathing heavily, staring at the carpet. Plug-in insanity. God help him, his eldest son was going mad. The strain of acceleration, a tendency toward escapism—he had taken it all too far. Poor Virgil. He had lost hold of the line between reality and packaging; he had fallen into the gulf.

"Dad?"

Bill glanced up and found Virgil standing in front of him, hands held out in a warm gesture.

"I'm sorry. If you're a sim, you're my sim. I can't be at odds with parts of myself. Maybe the fault is mine. I don't give reality enough credit."

"How did you do that?" Dad said, finding his breath. "How did you get here?"

"It's PI, isn't it? Why walk across the neighborhood when I can come in a blink? Hey, Dad, are you all right?"

The bedroom walls closed in, sides of a trap, but he was not afraid of being squeezed because they were dissolving into swirls of translucent mist.

"Dad?"

In horror, he backed away from his own hovering son. "Help!" he cried. "Help, get me out of here!"

No one came running from downstairs, nor had he expected them to; for now he was sure he could feel the IMR gloves, like a thicker invisible second skin, and the hood adjusting his breathing for maximum entrancement.

"What's wrong, Dad?"

"We're both plugged in, Virgil, but I didn't know it. There." He ripped at the floppy thing that clung to his head, seeming to tear a hole in the world as he did so. Through the fresh rent he saw Dr. Edison bending over him, his mouth compressed with deliberation; there were hands gripping his arms, forcing him back. His fingers, still in the IMR gloves, writhed in the simulated world: was that Virgil squeezing his hand?

"What are you doing?" he cried, his voice a croak.

"Hold still," Doc said. "You had to come out of it, didn't you, Bill? You could never sit still, never take things as they were. I was trying to make it easy on you—the transition, I mean. Well, you'd better relax and enjoy the ride."

"What are—" Dad fell silent, seeing that he was in one of the doctor's offices; the windows were dark. And around him, instead of nurses, were four figures still in their black robes, faces covered.

"It wasn't my initiation?" he said, strangely relieved about that end of things.

Doc shook his head, turning away to pick up a hypodermic needle. "It was your inquisition, Bill. I'm afraid you didn't do very well. You're too unstable. But it shouldn't matter now. When you're older, you won't be getting in much trouble."

"Doc . . . you lousy shit." Dad sat suddenly and spat at Edison; a globule of phlegm beaded on the end of his hypodermic needle. Doc shook the syringe as though it were a thermometer, then made a clucking sound. Before he could slip it in, Dad thrashed free of the restraining hands, hoping he could run from them. All he accomplished was the tearing of hoods from three of the figures in black. That was enough.

He sagged back, staring.

Each of them, under the hood, was another Dr. Edison. The Whelk Grand Council. Wheelwright.

"My God," he said. "Ouch!"

The needle was retracted. "Just call me Father Time," said the Edison who'd stabbed him. "Boys, put him back in his hood."

They forced him into his simulated bedroom, but he came into it at an angle that would have been impossible if he'd had a body. Plug-in wires were snarled somewhere. He could see Virgil standing below him; like something in a fish-eye lens, his head was huge while his body tapered down to tiny pointed feet.

"Virgil," he said, sound resonating from the walls.

Virgil turned and looked toward him, but apparently couldn't see him. "Dad?"

"I'm in the doctor's office, Virg—" Dad cut off with a groan; his cells, wherever they were, felt as if they were coming apart at the membranes. "Watch out for—"

"Well," said a shadow, rising to blacken his view of the room.

"What have we here?"

Dad was lost between dimensions of pain, straddling impossibilities. This shadow was like none he had seen before. It was a voice given substance, energy locked into an impression of matter in motion. A black whirlwind of a voice, a dust-devil speaking.

"So, you are the progenitor of our prize pupil. Your prodigal son has become my prodigal student. It is an honor to meet you, after hearing so much about you from Peter John."

Dad said nothing. He couldn't seem to find his own voice.

"Forgive me," the voice chuckled. "I am INRI. I was glancing through the telephone book and I happened to find your number. I'm so glad you're plugged in. I was hoping to find your son. Has he come home? I see you have another. Shall we see if talent runs in the family?"

Dad spat and sputtered. "I don't know anyone named Henry," he cried. "If you're behind this, Jock, I'll get my hands on you—"

"Hardly likely. I work through my minions, and they have many more hands than you. Mm. I've been sampling your community, savoring its souls. It looks delicious, from what I've seen through your convenient IMR network. Of course, IMR is vastly inferior to myself, but we take the conduits that are offered. Later there will be time to expand them. But aren't you listening?"

Dad wasn't sure what he was doing. Flashes, sizzles of smoke and light seemed to be leaping away with bits and pieces of him. Could those be memories burning out so neatly, leaving scars the size and color of cigarette burns in the void? Yes, acceleration was setting in.

"Pleasant meeting you," said the voice. "I'm glad we had this chance for a conversation. I see I've interrupted something, though.
I'll move along."

The voice roared off in the guise of a column of smoke, leaving him to settle like a pile of smoldering autumn leaves in its wake.

***

Virgil watched the wallpaper in one corner of his parents' room as it slowly bulged out and extruded his father. This Dad of the mind was if anything slightly heavier-set than the real thing, yet he floated to the carpet like an angel of grace, beaming at his son.

"What did you say about Doc Edison?" Virgil asked.

"Never mind, my son. I will be your healer now."

"A plug-in is telling me this?"

"As you remarked yourself, I am but a part of you. I am your own higher self, your true father."

That's what I get for apologizing, Virgil thought. Dad turns into the Pope.

"Why do you doubt, Virgil? Have I not promised you a good life, and a better death?"

Virgil wondered where his high self had picked up the phony diction.

If this was truly part of himself, and not merely a plug-in simulation of his father, then it would not fade and fray at the edges like everything else in the PI. It would have depth and dimension. It was an interesting prospect. Perhaps the plug-ins had been overlooked as tools for self-development, and this was an oblique plea on the part of his conscience to take a hand in his own growth, to lead him out of the trap in which he had lately become ensnared.
It could be that his "Dad" was a messenger, come to lead him out.

"What am I thinking?" he asked aloud.

Dad laughed. "You are confused by your own internal rhetoric. Why not transcend the petty cares, my son? Is it not what you desire?"

What I desire, Virgil thought, is to sail beyond the horizon— the real horizon, not an electronic mock-up. I want a book that doesn't dissolve into lint and ink-specks as soon as it starts getting interesting.

Surely, somewhere within himself, there was an untapped source of genius that could create the life he longed to live. "Ah," said his father, "but I am the life."

"Only in here," Virgil said. "What happens when I take off the hood and gloves? I'm back where I started, that's what."

Dad gave him a smile full of pity. "You underestimate me. Given time, anything is possible. Knock, Virgil, and I shall enter."

"Knock what?"

"Ask me in ..."

"You're already in."

For a moment it was as if Dad's face slipped askew. The smiling eyes filled with smoke, the air in the room began to scorch—but it was a subliminal moment, then Dad walked toward Virgil with a huge leather-bound book in his hands.

"Look," he said.

Virgil did not hesitate to take the volume. On the cover, in gold leaf, was the title: Euripides: The Lost Works.

He opened the book, at a loss for breath, and found himself suddenly soaring through a world of pure poetry, a place beyond phonetics, formed of the ideal sounds of perfect words. Greek. He knew he was reading it in the original. They were not words he knew how to utter, yet they reverberated around him in a mental gulf wider and deeper than any sky—calling to him, weaving him into their spell. The sensation, plugged-in, was too erotic, too intensely physical to be endured. He snapped the book shut, saw the gold letters shimmer and reconfigure, forming The Greatest Story Ever Told.

"What . . . how . . . ?" He held the book out to his father.

"Keep it, my son. It is yours."

"But then, in a way, I wrote it."

"Now you have an inkling of what wonders lie within yourself. Which is to say, within me."

"Then I am you."

Dad held out his hands and came forward. Virgil had never seen him keep such a pleasant mood for so long without swearing or making some sarcastic comment. It wasn't his father at all, he was sure of that now. His father never wanted to hug him, as this Dad seemed bent on doing.

Virgil avoided the embrace, laughing with embarrassment.

"We must merge," his father said.

Virgil shook his head, losing his nerve. "I—I can't spend all my time plugged-in, reading Euripides."

"Ah, I forget," Dad said. "You are steeped in the Greeks. Oedipus a blot upon your mind. See me in another shape, then, one more agreeable to you. Do you not know that our union is holy, a marriage of more than mere minds?"

Before his eyes, pounds of flesh melted away from Dad, and the wrinkled clothes with them. In seconds, he was faced with a naked woman, who at first glance resembled his sister Nancy. And then he realized—sensed—that it was his twin. She came toward him with her bare arms outstretched, hands wide, head thrown back, long hair swishing . . .

"Elaine!" he cried.

Out of the gloves, out of the hood, into the dark of his office in the silent house. He jumped up from the chair, wishing for some light other than the glow of the console. The shadows were threatening; the walls trembled, as if out of them, at any moment, one of a myriad of figures might come walking: his father, his mother, a holy ghost.

He headed for the hall, banged his thigh against the desk, and finally, in the darkness, found Elaine coming to his cry. She turned on all the lights and soothed him, brought him back to bed, but not before he had seen the letters glowing faintly in the air beneath her face, as though projected there by lanterns in his eyes:

SCARLET WOMAN

"We daren't go further than this in the car," Sweeney said. "They must know we're here. Our chances are better if we meet them on foot."

"Where are we?" Connie asked. She had been yawning since sunset, but now she was wide awake again. There was nothing to see, however, except a tangled sort of darkness: tree trunks and branches clutched the light from the headlamps and scattered it into bits.

"I don't know if it has a name," he said. "I've negotiated near here; it's a place where the guerillas occasionally meet with us, a neutral ground."

He helped her out, showing her where to put her feet by flashing a pocket light on the ground. There was ruined cement, but it was cratered and covered with dead branches; thorn bushes grew over it, narrowing it to a trail just ahead. The car could have gone no further anyway.

Going ahead with his light, Sweeney began to whistle. It was not a song that she knew; it sounded more like a code. After a few minutes, she grew nervous, for she could hear crackling in the wood around them. It was so black out there—she had never seen such a darkness. She felt like grabbing his arm so that she could shine the light where she wished, but that was childish. Besides, he had begun to flash the light on and off; it must have been another code.

Finally she saw light ahead of them, swinging through the woods. Their pace quickened, but they had not even come near the light when they were stopped by a thick heap of branches and thorns. While Sweeney pondered it, and she squinted at the light, a footstep snapped twigs behind them. She spun to find half a dozen shapes standing in their trail.

"Ashenwriste?" said a tall, bearded man. "This is a strange time for the Cartel—"

"I've quit the Cartel, Arthur," Sweeney said quickly. "We're looking for shelter, for whatever help you can give."

The man considered this. He looked wary—particularly of Connie.

"Hello," she said, forcing the word from her throat.

"This is Mrs. Johnson," he said. "She's from the res-enclave on the coast."

The figures looked at each other. There were three men, three women, all in black garments and high laced boots. "Johnson?" said one. "Do you have a son?" "P.J.!" Connie blurted.

They smiled. "Welcome, then," said Arthur. "Of course, the boy will have to identify you."

"This is not a hoax," Ashenwriste said. "We hoped you knew P.J.'s whereabouts."

"Oh yes, we know. He lives with us."

Connie could hardly believe what she was hearing, what she felt. Ashenwriste's isolating light, and the dense shadows all around, set her in a realm that was like a nightmare, except that the news she'd been given was the best possible.

Three of the sentinels led them through the wood; Ashenwriste gave his pass to one of the others, who returned to hide the car. It was an hour's walk before they saw campfires before them, and then they entered a sleeping settlement.

Their escorts left them by a fire. Arthur could be heard calling, there was a rush in the darkness, and more people appeared, yawning, blinking. A crowd gathered around them; some greeted Ashenwriste with familiarity, but all of them stared at Connie.

And then, out of the mob of inquisitive faces, one came forward full of recognition. She put out her arms, weeping.

"Mom!" said P.J., embracing her. "What are you doing here?"

THE WASTE OF TIME

"Good morning," said Jock Smith. "How did you sleep?"

Nancy said nothing, because she was gagged by a tight-stretched dishcloth, but she glowered as best she could. She had been awake for hours. Her arms were bent in an agonizing position behind her back; it was easy to take that pain and focus it through her eyes, sending it right at Mr. Smith. But nothing happened.

She looked at the half-opened door, wishing she could make some sound, wondering how long she would be left here.

There was a light rap on the door and Mrs. Smith came in with a TV tray. She knelt beside her husband, smiled, and pulled the cover from a small insta-serve.

"I'll get her gag," Mr. Smith said.

"No, Jock, that's all right. All this is pureed. Baby food. She can suck it through the cloth." Her eyes were narrow and bright as she held the first spoonful to Nancy's lips. Nancy turned her head away: it smelled like liver.

Mr. Smith looked bothered. "It couldn't hurt to take out the gag.
No one could hear her—"

"Are you still here?" she said, turning on him quickly with the dripping spoon. "Get back to your post."

He stood up, brushing at his legs. "Yes, dear."

When he was gone, Mrs. Smith set down the spoon, got up and closed the door, then came back and stood with her bony, dimpled knees inches from Nancy's eyes.

"I saw the most interesting thing on television last night. Your mother gave the performance of her life. We're all waiting to see what your father will think of it . . . except that no one knows where he is. Believe me, I have nothing against Connie, nothing at all. It's your father I want to see hurt." The knees turned and walked away.
"As he hurt me."

She gulped loudly under the gag. Mrs. Smith opened the door and went out, slammed it behind her, leaving Nancy staring at the spoonful of untouched food, the steaming insta-serve. Creamed liver.
She wished she weren't so hungry.

A few minutes later the door opened again. This time it was
Arnold.

She narrowed her eyes at him. He had lured her over last night, after all. They were in this together, the Smiths.

"I know what you're thinking, Nancy, but it isn't true." He crouched down. "My mom kept asking me to invite you over, but I never thought she—she would do this."

Her eyes must have shown her disbelief. He looked desperate, his hands squeezed together. "I'll get you out of here, I promise," he said. "I have to watch out for my parents, though. It'll mean fooling both of them. If I do that, will you believe I didn't have anything to do with this?"

She wasn't going to respond, but then they heard Mrs. Smith calling for Arnold. He jumped up and she mumbled through the cloth before he could disappear. When he glanced back at her, she was nodding wildly. He smiled. "Thanks." And was gone.

***

Dad's head was full of anecdotes. He dozed in the warm car, occasionally slumping against the driver. He wanted to tell Dr. Edison tales of his childhood, but the things he wished to say were in such a crowd that he could hardly get a

single one forth. It was easier to sit and reminisce. In fact, his memories—except in the places where there were blank spots—were occasionally a great deal sharper than his sense of exactly why he was where he was. He had to fight that fogginess. There were things to do, and he'd need his wits.

"Come on, Bill," Doc Edison said. "We're home. Now you remember what we're going to do?"

"Hm." Dad thought a moment. His head was clearing very slowly.

"The nuke," he said.

"That's right. You know how to turn it off?"

"Oh . . . of course I do. I'm not senile, you know."

"No, Bill, you're not senile. Do you need help getting out?"

"Damn it, no, don't treat me like that. It'll be good to stretch my legs. Feel like I've been bent up all night."

"You had a hard night of it."

The first breath of fresh air made him lucid. He watched Doc Edison come around the car to help him, as though he were about to fall over. Actually he felt spry, better than he had in years. In the night, he had lost a good deal of weight.

Edison insisted on helping Dad onto the sidewalk. But just as they reached the mailbox, Dad pulled away and stepped onto the walk himself. He chuckled aloud, and the Doc must have known what he was laughing about because he began to yell after him.

"Come back here, Bill! Let me help you."

Dad turned to Edison. "Come on in yourself, Doc. What's the matter? You sure you don't need my help?"

The doctor's eyes went up to the eaves.

"You're not that stupid, are you, Doc? Except you underestimated me. You thought putting a few years on me would turn me into an old fart? You thought you'd get me to shut down my nuke just like that?"

Edison's face was like gristle. "Goddamn you, old man."

"Call me granddad," Dad said. "And go to hell."

As he headed up the walk, Edison said, "You're unstable! You're old! It's too dangerous to leave something like that nuke in your hands, Johnson!"

"So come and take it away from me, Doc."

He reached the door. By the time he got there, his children were already waiting for him. Stephanie, Lyndon Baines, and Lady Bird, that is. They didn't seem to recognize him at first.

"Grandpa?" said Lyndon eventually.

"I look like him, don't I?" said Dad. "Except for one thing, Lyndon, and think about this—think hard, now." He put a sticklike finger to his temple. "Your grandpa can't get to this door alone—he's not keyed to the security system."

"And grandpa's dead," said Lady Bird.

"Daddy?" said Stephanie.

"And no other. Let me in, children."

He passed a mirror in the hall on his way in, and stopped to admire himself. He was no longer a fat man. His eyes were clear and the sudden loss of weight seemed to have straightened his spine. He was now completely gray, and almost completely bald. He walked on into the living room with a long-legged step, joyful, his hands on either twin's shoulders.

"My own father found his prime rather late in life," he said. His words came out sounding different to him; each was a word to be savored. "It mellowed him, I suppose, and made him wise. Of course, he never accelerated much. Anyway, it's not quite what I'd expected, kids, I'll tell you."

When he had lowered himself slowly into a big chair, avoiding his usual place on the couch, Stephanie scrambled to sit on his knee.

"Won't your mother be surprised," he said with a chuckle. "Where is she anyway?"

"We don't know, Dad," Lyndon said.

"She wasn't home all night," said Lady Bird. "And Nancy June's gone, too. She went out with Arnold and didn't come back."

Dad plowed his forehead with a fingertip. "Out all night? Damn."

He didn't say anything else for a long time. Then he started a little and sat forward. "I'll bet she went for a treatment all on her own." He slapped his knee, then looked at his palm with a shocked expression; it had felt so bony. "She—she must've thought she'd match her years to mine. Imagine if she were still so young and pretty, and I was an old man like this. How considerate of her. How goddamned like her."

Once more Dad's eyes went glassy and his thoughts seemed to wander.

"I've been on a long journey, children," he said at last.

"Where did you go?" Stephanie asked, watching the steel-gray hairs on the back of his spotted hands. Looking down at the kids, Dad felt a new sense of closeness. It was easier to love them now. There seemed to be less distractions—fewer things that mattered besides them.

"Last night, strange dreams chased me around. But it's all behind me now. Funny how these things pass. Some things, it seems to me, are as clear as glass; others things I can't seem to understand. It's always been like that. What it is, I think, is my mind making room for the important things, refusing to waste time and space on things that don't matter. Things like the past. I've never been very big on the past. Always been more concerned that I not do the future a disservice."

He looked at them, all waiting for his next words of wisdom.

"Christ," he said, "did I say all that?"

"We were making lunch when you came," said Lady Bird. "Would you like some?"

"Sure," he said. "I could eat my old self right now."

They scurried away and returned with steaming insta-serves. His nostrils caught a hearty, salmony smell, and he licked his lips with a dry tongue.

"I see someone's a good cook," he said.

"This was all we could get out of the processor," Lyndon said. "I think it's fish. I hate fish."

Dad took a bite of the stuff and felt a warm tingle spreading through his blood. "It's good," he assured them.

The kids sat on the sofa, where their mother never allowed them to eat. Revolution was in the air.

"It's not too bad," Lyndon said. "Whatever it is."

Dad ate slowly, picking at his food, all the while feeling dizzier but more pleased with himself. He was the patriarch of Cobblestone Hill now. Soon he'd be ready for Sunset Ranch, but not immediately. There would be time to dispense his wisdom, tell the grandkids how he'd opposed the community and installed the first garage-based nuke, time to sit on his ass and . . .

The nuke. Sudden concern overcame him. He rose and went back to the garage.

Erica lay asleep against the nuke; her eyes parted as he stepped through the door. She looked wary of betrayal, as though he of all people might have come to threaten her ward. Nor did she relax when he sat down a good ten feet from the nuke and began to speak.

"You're probably the only one who understands what this means to me, Erica. It's special to you, too, isn't it? Not just a machine. It's more than that—it always has been. It's at the heart of everything that matters. Made by mankind, but inspired by eternity." She cuddled closer to the nuke.

"Warm, isn't it? A regular little hearth. Here it is, the culmination of all I've done, and they'd like to take it away from me. They'd like to leave me powerless."

Erica looked at him as though she understood, but of course she couldn't. The load in her diapers rattled. He wondered how long it had been since she'd been changed.

"Nuke," Erica said suddenly.

Dad jumped up, startled. It was the baby's first word. He snatched his daughter from the ground before she could scuttle away, and his laughter bounced from the roof as he held her aloft. As he was dancing around with her—shaking reluctant, startled laughs from her blue and gray mouth—Lady Bird opened the door to the garage and leaned in.

"Dad? Dr. Edison is at the door. He was trying to tell me not to talk to you and to let him in, but—"

"Thanks, doll." He handed Erica to her as he passed, and saw the startled look on her face when she saw the baby's smile.

"What were you doing to her?" she said, but he was halfway down the hall.

"Hello, Doc!" he said, shouting into the speaker. Several residents of the neighborhood—from houses up and down the street —had accompanied the doctor on his return visit; or perhaps they had come to see what the fuss was all about. Douglas Taylor was with him.

"Bill," the Doc said, "I have a certificate here, requiring your removal from these premises. We should never have let you come home from your treatment. You're unfit to—"

"You never should have, Doc, that's right. I was too bleary-eyed when I woke up to seem much of a threat, probably. But I'm home now, and there's no way you're getting me out of here and packed off to Sunset Ranch just so that you can come in and— and castrate this community."

Doc turned to Taylor. "You see what I mean. There were complications with his acceleration."

"He's off his nut," Taylor said. "Listen, Johnson, why don't you come out of there?"

"You'll see what a turtle is," Dad said to himself. He turned up the speaker, so that his voice was audible for several blocks.

"Maybe I seem senile to you, Doc, but you're older than me. I don't recall you ever having a treatment in all the time I've been here. Why is that, Doc? Why do you seem to be the only constant thing around here?"

Doc's replies, whatever they might have been, were completely drowned out.

"No, I don't think you're going to get me out of here. You built a maze and filled it with rats, but if you want this particular rat, you're going to have to come into the maze."

He shut off the speaker, which gave a scream of feedback that might have broken windows in the houses next door before it died. He turned to the living room to find his children gathered there, watching him in astonishment.

"What's the matter?" he said.

"Can we play in the backyard?" Lyndon asked.

"I think you'd better keep to your rooms for awhile," he said.

"Can I work the lasers?" Lady Bird asked.

"That's all computer-controlled, Lady. Now we sit tight and let our house take care of us, that's all."

"What about Mommy?" Stephanie asked. "And Nancy, too?" That was a good question, he realized. If Connie had actually gone for a treatment, surely Edison would have gone back to his office and brought her out for bargaining. Drugged and stupid in abrupt old age, she might even have pleaded with him to come out of the house. But she wasn't out there.

"She didn't leave me a message when she left?" he said. "No,
Dad. She was gone when we got back from the beach yesterday." "Did you see her go on the family hour last night?"

The kids looked guilty. "We were watching cartoons."

"Well," he said. And then: "Well, well."

Dad felt his gorge rising. Whatever the orange food had been, it had gone sour in his stomach. Nerves, he told himself. He had been feeling good until now.

The next idea that came to him was frightening. Nancy and Connie were both gone, and Arnold was implicated. And the house across the street was staying oddly quiet through all the fuss outdoors.

He stared at the phone. His mouth dry, he remembered that he'd once had a purpose for cultivating Nan's friendship with Arnold Smith. Could that have backfired on him now?

It was up to him to find out.

He went to the phone, punched in the number, and waited a good thirty seconds before anyone answered.

It was Jock Smith, barely recognizable. Since his missile party, he had deteriorated; much of the polished exterior had rubbed off or been covered in a thin layer of grime. He came close to resembling the monster that Dad had always suspected hid behind the innocent facade.

"Jock," he said. "How are you?"

Jock didn't seem to recognize him, which was something of a relief. But then, Dad didn't look much like the William D. Johnson everyone had known. It took Jock several moments to recognize the elderly caller, and then he backed away from the screen, no longer merely frowning but screeching: "Doris! Doris! It's him—him!"

Doris eclipsed her spouse. Her smile seemed to come right into the Johnsons' living room, triumphant.

"Doris," he whispered, suddenly understanding Jock's particular antipathy toward him, seeing head-on the motive force behind the man of the house.

"It is you, isn't it, you old fart?" she said. "My, what a difference a day makes."

"What's going on?" Dad said.

Doris's words came slowly, almost in a purr. "I'm glad you called. We were wondering whether we should be the ones." Behind her, Jock snickered.

He could see her rather differently now. Perhaps it was the change in his own hormones, but she appeared to be nothing more than a scrawny, vengeful girl. She looked older than a girl, but a wholly adolescent spite was pickled in her eyes. He had always known that she wanted to hurt him; but he had never before seen this without a commingling of desire. Today, at last, he had let go of desire.

"Doris," he said, "if I thought apologies would help, I'd make them. In fact, I do apologize. What happened between us was a mistake. I was young and stupid; I admit it. It was perhaps the clumsiest affair ever managed. But it wasn't any more than that, at least until time blew it out of all proportion."

He realized that she wasn't even listening. She was fiddling at the panel of keys below the screen.

"I even apologize to your jackass husband," he said loudly. "You hear that, Jock? I'm sorry."

Doris looked up quickly and made a circle of her thumb and forefinger. "Full circle," she said. "In case you haven't seen this yet, enjoy the show."

The screen flickered, the Smith's living room blinked out, and another appeared. It was Dad's living room, the same that waited at the corners of his eyes, except that something unfamiliar was happening in it: on the couch, at the edge of

the coffee table, on the arms of his favorite chair. Quick cuts carried the action from one scene to the next, but the two players were always the same.

Dizzying.

He turned and looked around and saw the children staring past him, wide-mouthed. As soon as he saw them, he turned back to the screen and switched it off, but not before he glimpsed the pastel garments tossed about the room along with Connie's stockings, Connie's blouse.

"Daddy," Lady Bird said. "Can I please use the lasers just this once?"

***

"I love you, too, Virgil, but look how late it's getting, and you haven't done a lick of work all day." Elaine smiled and patted him on the bare shoulder, gently, before pushing him away. "Why don't you plug in for a little while before dinner?"

"But," was all he could think of to say, and that was hardly good enough.

Gradually, she teased him out of the bed, making the process almost enjoyable; and when he was wrapped in his bathrobe, and she in hers, there was something of a goose chase that promised to lead downstairs to the kitchen but ended up with him hiding from her behind the chair in his office while she threatened to tickle him with a detached clothes-clutch. In the next moment she closed the door behind her and he heard her muffled voice saying, "Get some work done, Virgil, really. I need time to myself, you know."

He sighed, moved around the chair, and slipped into it. It was silly to be so afraid of a plug-in. In any case, he was in much better spirits now; there wouldn't be any weirdness awaiting him tonight, he was sure. And if there was, he could handle it.

He pulled on the thin gloves, felt his way into the hood, and tapped in the entry code. For a moment nothing happened, and he thought the system had failed to activate; then he sensed the presence standing behind, felt its breath upon his scalp, heard it step over to the desk and open a drawer.

"Hello?" he said.

He was still quite blind: there was no visual image. Was this some kind of punishment for coming to work so late?

"It's only me," said Elaine.

"How did you get back in here? This thing doesn't seem to be working."

"Oh." The voice grew deeper, sliding down the word. "Is it working now?"

Panicking, he grabbed at the hood as if he were trying to pull off his face, and it came away with a rubbery sucking sound. He wadded up the gloves, too, and threw them at the desk. Elaine stood by the desk, shaking her head.

"What's the matter?" she said.

He felt a rush of anger that she had invaded his office while he was working; but she smiled, as though sensing it, enjoying it. It dawned on him that she was already fully dressed, made up, her hair neatly combed and braided.

"You can't be Elaine," he said.

"Why not?" she said, seating herself on the corner of his desk, looking at her fingernails. He was sure that they'd been painted green five minutes before; now they were scarlet.

My God, he thought. Could she have a clone sister? All this time, and I never knew.

But there was another possibility, though he could not quite decide how to test it.

"What do you want?" he said.

"You always work so hard," she said. "Why don't you take a break and . . ." She undid a button on her blouse. "Again?" he said with a yelp.

She frowned, rising. "Virgil—"

"Oh no," he said. "Not you again. I don't know how you've done it, but no. I don't think I want to merge. Not with that part of myself. I'm not ready."

Her face lit up, literally. "Good," she said.

"Not for me."

He clawed at his hands, which looked bare, and suddenly found his fingers sliding into a tight pair of gloves. It was as he had feared: he was still plugged-in, had only imagined pulling out.

He tore off the gloves as quickly as he could, but before he could get to the hood, he felt another pair of hands slipping up along the base of his head to help him off with it. His whole body cooled, then, in a single slow shiver.

As his eyes came unveiled, he saw above him a shriveled man with blood streaming over his time-gouged face from nails embedded in his scalp. His teeth champed, a trail of spittle lengthened from his lips, his eyes glowed blood-red and filled the room with their light.

In horror now, Virgil felt for another pair of gloves; it was like digging into his own skin. Halfway through the extrication, he decided he would rather remove the hood first, if only to get rid of the sight of the bloody man; he started to pull at the flesh of his face, but had hardly lifted it past one eye when he saw the worse world awaiting him. The walls had been skinned, and the man was a shifting, grinning mass of coils and smoke and charring. There was a stench of burned hair.

He collapsed between worlds, tangled in attachments, and heard a buzzing voice say, "Relax, relax, it's only me. It's only yourself." He would never believe that now.

Dad could not get ahold of Ashenwriste. He thought he should give him the information personally; but after all, the Cartel was a company. It hardly mattered which salesman had shucked his pastel underpants in Dad's living room.

"Can I take a message for Mr. Ashenwriste?" asked the prim secretary, her eyes blurred behind electronic spectacles.

"All right," Dad said. "You can tell him that I'm shutting down my nuke."

Her eyes fired up, spitting sparks. "I beg your pardon?"

"You heard me. I'll be at home if Ashenwriste wants to reach me.
I'll be wanting my deposit back immediately."

He broke the connection, enjoying the look in her lenses. But the pleasure was only superficial, the merest flicker of a smile; underneath there was little but pain. His initial vigor had subsided into intimations of oncoming frailty, twinges of pain in places that had never bothered him, and once more the old burning in his gut.
He was cranky tonight. God, he was cranky.

He walked to the window of his office and looked out over the street. A few people milled around beneath the streetlights, watching his house; it was a warm evening, clear for a change. Of course, no one approached his lawn. In the window across the way, Jock Smith and Doris were arguing silently.

Dad's phone blipped. Ashenwriste? He invoked the image and found himself staring face to face with Arnold Smith. The boy looked miserable, frazzled, apologetic.

"Mr. Johnson, I'm sorry about all this, I—"

"Do you have anything to be sorry about, son?"

Arnold smiled slightly, straightening his back. "I've got to be quick." In the background, it was possible to hear Doris and Jock yelling. "I built a nuclear bomb. Nancy was helping me with it, that's how my parents got ahold of her. They were hoping you'd have to come begging for her."

Dad shook his head. "Thoughts keep falling through the cracks, son. You built a bomb?"

"That's not as important as Nancy, sir. I think I can get her out of the house, but I'm not sure what good it will do. She'd be safer inside if the bomb goes off out there. I've got a shield around the yard, to protect this space from a blast. It's a little stronger than the one I used at the potluck. Dad has the switch, unfortunately. And the bomb detonator. I haven't told him which is which."

Dad nodded, taking all this in. "It looks pretty bad, doesn't it,
Arnold?"

"Yeah. I just wanted to tell you, don't fire on our house, okay?
Not with the bomb in here."

"Not with Nancy in there, either."

Arnold smiled. "I don't think she'll be in here too long. If you can, Bill, you should get out of the neighborhood altogether. I mean, far away. Fast."

Dad shook his head in admiration. "You're a good kid, but I'm too old to leave this place."

Arnold looked up suddenly. "Gotta go—" Blank screen.

There was a knock on the door and Lady Bird came in. She carried an insta-serve, pulled open to reveal a steaming orange concoction.

"Thanks, hon. I'm not hungry tonight. Now I want you downstairs, with the others. I'm going to shut down the nuke in a few minutes. I think we should all gather in the garage . . . "

He turned to the window, hands clasped behind his back, and looked down at the street as a long, thin car pulled up to the curb and Ashenwriste got out.

"Ah," Dad said. "Company."

He hurried downstairs as quickly as he could, but every step jarred his bones and made him feel like he was crumbling into sharp fragments. His breathing was fast but all too shallow. When he reached the front door, in time to greet Ashenwriste, he was out of breath.

"Come for your precious unit?" he said. "You're just in time to see it shut down."

"Mr. Johnson, there's been a terrific misunderstanding."

Dad waited a minute, saddened, then said, "I had great hopes, Ashenwriste. For all of us. But I have to believe my eyes. You've got my wife somewhere. I take it she went with you of her own will, so I have to rely on my will now, and my best judgment. I don't need you or your nuke. I should have gone solar long ago."

"I must explain, Mr. Johnson; there's the matter of a renegade
Cartel employee to take into account."

"That would be you?"

"Not exactly. A clone, you see—"

"Enough of this, Ashenwriste. You always talked too fast and fancy. You've been working on us from the start, haven't you?"

"Mr. Johnson, please let us help you work toward a solution that the entire neighborhood—"

"You've been splitting this place in half and in half again, man! I think things are about as messed up as they're likely to get. Did you know my neighbors across the street, those proud proponents of natural gas, have built a bomb with the nuclear material they voted against?"

Apparently, Ashenwriste had not had the faintest idea of this development. "Sir! Let me extend my services as a liaison. I feel sure that working together with you and the Smiths, we can come to some arrangement—"

"You as liaison? You're on the hook with the rest of us. How about if I fire right into their house, Mr. Ashenwriste, and see if I can set off that device? It wouldn't be too good for business, would it? All those potential customers gone. Not to mention yourself, though there must be more where you came from, if you're a clone."

Ashenwriste might have been crying. "Mr. Johnson, we can—"

Dad cut him off. As he headed through the living room, toward the garage, he heard shouting from the street. Lyndon Baines and Stephanie ran to the window and opened the curtains. Outside, a crowd had gathered again, though it kept back from the Johnson and Smith yards and gathered around streetlights. Mr. Ashenwriste was standing in the middle of the street, yelling at the upper window of the Smiths' house.

"Listen," he screamed, taking a step toward the opposite lawn. "You must listen to reason!"

Dad was the one who cried out in shock to see the blaze of light from under his own eaves, to see the man lit up and blackening in the same instant. An enemy, but still a man. Ashenwriste crumpled, and the streetlights went out.

Upstairs, Lady Bird shouted, "I got him!"

***

Like a fly wrapped in spider webbing, Virgil waited to be sucked dry. He could not move forward or backward; he could not wake up or go to sleep. His captor moved around him, back and forth, spinning.

"Be still," said the voice. "Be still. Now is the time of union. I have lived too long in the cold shell of technology, silicate, at one remove from everything. I shall never forget the place of my birth, naturally, but the time has come to take flesh once more. I am come again. And you, Virgil, shall be my host."

In the plugged-in state, the substance of perception was all too readily molded by suggestion, by fear. Now Virgil imagined the voice as belonging to an enormous hermit crab that had crawled up out of the sea to seize him and pry him from his body. The image grew ever more real—began to scuttle, to stink of evaporating tidal pools, briny scum.

He could voice no protest. The creature readied itself in silence, and Virgil was too numb to struggle.

Wet, unsticking sounds. A blast of decay. Scrabbling. The feeler touching his face. He did not even have to open his eyes to see it up there, huge but now naked and somehow vulnerable. He thought of hermit crabs that had died in the sun before slipping into their new shells, and wished he could somehow call a sun into being. But that power was not his, not here, not now.

It probed his mouth, parted his jaws, prepared to enter.

And then there was blackness, the scream of someone pushed over a cliff into an incredible gulf, falling and falling away forever, a gigantic voice fading into death.

Virgil stared, saw only the dark, heard the ringing in his ears but no longer felt the scuttler's presence, nor smelled its fetor.

After a moment he heard a sharp rap.

Elaine's voice: "The power's out, Virgil, but come down anyway. I've made a real meal—not insta-serves. We can eat by candlelight."

***

The windows of all the houses along Arch Street were dark. For a moment it was hard to see anything outside, because the light in the Johnsons' living room made their window glare like a mirror. The Johnsons stared at their obsidian reflections, and only slowly did images from the outside begin to seep through as their eyes adjusted.

"Quick," Dad said, "pull the shades."

Ashenwriste was dead, and the power as well. It must have been the Cartel's equivalent of a moment of silence; he thought it might last longer than that, however. Good thing he hadn't gotten around to the nuke just yet. He would need its power.

He tried not to think of the man in cinders outside, but it was impossible. Ashenwriste's death, after all, had given him an advantage. If only there were some way to call the Smiths and make a threat oblique enough to succeed. He had working weapons, it was true, but they still had Nancy and the bomb.

"Dad," said Lyndon, his face pressed to the window between the curtains. "Someone's coming out. It's Mr. Smith. And he's pulling a red wagon."

"Let me see." Dad looked out over Lyndon's head and saw Jock trundling down his front path toward the sidewalk, hauling a wagon behind him. In the wagon was a large cardboard box.

"My God," Dad said. "He's hauling that bomb out to the street."

Of course. He couldn't expect even Jock Smith to set off a nuclear bomb in his living room. He would leave it beyond the perimeter of Arnold's shield, then step back and turn it on before detonation.

He could see the people on the street at last accepting the darkness and moving toward Ashenwriste, or returning to their houses, shambling like sleepwalkers.

"Get away from me," Jock yelled. "I've got a bomb in here." As one, the crowd stopped, turned, and ran off in every direction. They could have had no idea of the power of the bomb, unless the size of the cardboard box gave it to them.

"Where are you going, Dad?"

He had dropped the curtain and started across the living room toward the front door. He paused and looked back at Stephanie, chewing at the inside of his lip. "I think Jock and I had better have this out," he said, and that was all. His hand closed on the doorknob.

"Dad!"

He was not sure who had called, for he closed the door quickly behind himself and stepped from the security of his front porch. He was safe on the path, of course—but not from the bomb, if it should go off. Nothing would be safe from that, except for the tiny oasis of Jock's house.

He strode quickly down the front path, and when he reached the sidewalk tried not to shudder as he stepped onto it. But it was impossible not to show fear, when fear was all he felt.

Unprotected, he stood on the curb and watched Jock Smith toting the wagon toward him. Above Jock, Doris waited in the upstairs window, a candlelit silhouette.

"Here—here's something especially for you," Jock said. Dad couldn't make out his face in the night.

"Is it from you or Doris?" Dad asked. "Or do you even know?"

Jock stopped, looked down at the wagon. "From all of us, to all of you."

"I feel sorry for you, Jock," Dad said. "I never used to, God knows, but I do now. Silly, I once thought there might be something lurking under your wormy surface. You're all hollowed out, aren't you?"

"Talk, talk," Jock said. "Well, here you go, Bill. I'll leave you to it."

He stood back and put his foot on the end of the wagon, and gave it a good push. It clattered over the asphalt, rushing toward the curb and a good jolting finish. Jock ran back to his own yard.

Dad caught the wagon easily, gently, and took up its handle.

Then, whistling, he began to walk after Jock, hauling it behind him.

"Dad!" came an urgent whisper. "I'm in here, okay?"

He stopped in the middle of the street and looked down at the box. It shook slightly. He could hear it breathing.

"Nancy?" he said, knowing that it was.

A shout from Smith's house made him look up. On the front lawn, he could see two figures struggling: Jock and Arnold.

"Don't do it, dad," Arnold said. "Gimme that. Come on, dad, give it. You don't know what you're doing."

Dad ran toward them. "Arnold!" he cried.

Jock shouted, two square objects dropping from either hand. Dad stepped onto the lawn, dimly hearing the pounding overhead as Doris beat her fists against the window. He reached Arnold, caught him by the shoulders. The boy was strong, but with the last of his strength he pulled him away and sent him spinning toward the street. How easily he was winded now.

"Stay away, Arnold!" he called.

Jock lay fallen, glaring up, his hands groping toward the things on the grass. They were remote-control boxes, Dad saw now: black cubes with buttons in the centers of their faces. He started to dive toward them, but as he reached out a bright line of fire struck one of his hands, sending a scream of pain through him, causing his belly to burn in sympathy.

He looked up and saw Doris holding a batteryop laser. He didn't pause, but grabbed with the other hand and threw himself backward, having claimed only one of the boxes.

Jock sat up, holding the other.

Which was which? Both boxes looked identical.

Dad looked at the street and saw Arnold with his arms around the cardboard box, weeping. No help there.

If Jock knew which box he held, his eyes gave nothing away. But it didn't matter. Either neither button must be punched, or both must be pushed together. Somehow, Dad didn't think there was any time left for talking—not with Doris taking aim again.

Jock's finger twitched. Dad took a chance. Both buttons clicked.

Dad never knew if he'd destroyed himself or saved the others. The shield and the blast were one and the same to him.

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The pillar of fire grew, spilling hot light everywhere as it rose higher, first illuminating then piercing the slight layer of high clouds. It was not a gout of flame, not a mushroom, but a column: squareedged, impossibly thin, a sword stabbing heaven. The sound reverberated from the night sky, blasted at the stars. Below, the land lay thrown into relief and all the Christian troops on the hillsides— prostrate and with covered heads—were brightly lit. From this distance it was hard to be certain, but Connie thought that the few soldiers who watched the pillar had their hands clasped in prayer. It had certainly stopped their advance.

She looked over at P.J., his mouth set, eyes watering. Then she got back in the car.

"You still want to go on?" Sweeney asked them.

They did not need to answer that question again. After a minute Sweeney started the car and they went quickly down the dirt road, into trees that hid her view of the troops.

"I can't imagine what happened," Sweeney said.

"Would the Cartel tell you anything?"

He shook his head. "I'm not in a position to ask them."

The white-hot column rose higher as they approached the neighborhood; in twenty minutes, the most advanced of the troops were behind them and the gates of the neighborhood were just ahead. The pillar seemed to be darkening, as though the container that held the fire were scorching on the inside. Sweeney pulled off the road into a gulley and keyed open the entrance to the Cartel's secret tunnel. The car's headlights probed the dark passage as they moved slowly forward.

She had started to ask him a question to take her mind off her claustrophobia, when she saw his face change, brow twisting. She jerked her head around, looking into the path of the car. Several men came rushing toward them without seeing the vehicle; she thought she was imagining things. The car slowed, rolled to a stop, but they came on, eyes wide and blind, like things that had lived all their lives in the dark. One banged into the nose of the car, groped at the hood, then passed around it with the others, as though it were no more than a stone in the center of the passage. A moment later they were gone, running into the darkness behind them, and only then she thought to call out: "Dr. Edison!"

"Clones," P.J. said. "They looked insane. We better hurry."

They came out above the sea, in the fenced-in Cartel power station. The tower of fire lay in shifting interlocked pieces upon the water, and it was also above them, puncturing the sky. It made her dizzy to look up at it.

Connie thought of Bill. Now was not the time. If he had returned to the house, seen the tapes, there would be little enough to say. Still, she thought the children should have a chance to choose between them. She had not yet been able to explain to P.J. why she had left the neighborhood.

Sweeney drove on without trying to draw her out of herself. The streets of home, they found, were full of people staring at the sky, at the tarnishing pillar. It was clear from here that the tower stood on top of Cobblestone Hill. She could not explain why, but she felt it belonged there.

The very base of the pillar was jet black by the time they reached it, and the blackening continued steadily upward. In the undiminished light from above, however, she could see her house, the shades drawn, the light still burning on the porch. There was a red wagon in the middle of the street, the tatters of a cardboard box. While she was staring at these, she heard a voice say, "Mother?"

Nancy came out on the porch with Arnold. "Mom?" Her face brightened with shock. "P.J.!"

In the next moment they all met on the path. Stephanie even brought Junior out to see her, though he wept at the strange glare from above.

She froze, hearing the rumble of the contained fire behind her, and looked back at the pillar. Sweeney had stayed at the car, perhaps fearing the household sentries. The pillar dwarfed him, as it dwarfed everything except the night—and even into that it threw its dwindling brilliance.

"Where's your father?" she asked.

Nancy squeezed her hand. "Mom . . ."

Connie let go of them and looked at the column. Someone had laid a handful of flowers on the street before it. Understanding made her cold, and she wished Sweeney would hold her. She went down to the sidewalk and took his hand, still watching the pillar, then tugged him along to the house.

"I think we should shut down the nuke," he said. "There's no telling if this thing is stable."

She let go of him and pulled her children closer to her. Sweeney went on into the house, brushing past Nancy on her way out with an overnight bag. "I figured we were leaving," she said.

Connie nodded. "Get your things together, all of you."

"What about Virgil?" P.J. said. "Is there room, if he wants to come with us?"

"Virgil and Elaine," Nancy said. "You've been away so long, P.J." "I think we can squeeze in," said Mom. "Shall we try?" "Where did Mr. Ashenwriste go?" Nancy asked. "That Mr. Ashenwriste, I mean."

"He went—"

They fell silent at the sounds from the garage: a scream, and then a hurried pleading: "No, no, nice baby. Nice baby! Nice!"